Reading Excess

Transgression and Communication In/Between the Theory and Fiction of Georges Bataille

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King's College London

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD.

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2015

Abstract

Georges Bataille is a thinker whose work is especially hard to encapsulate within disciplinary boundaries, owing to his engagement with a vast and seemingly contradicting array of genres and themes: from philosophy to sociology, ethnography and economics, to art, poetry and fiction. Bataille's work defies easy systematisation and has accordingly provoked a heterogeneous range of critical responses. This thesis aims to approach Bataille's work as a whole, taking into account that *wholeness* in Bataille cannot be approached from an objective or strictly 'scientific' perspective. Bataille himself claimed to have engaged with a project that opposes the notion of utility, that aims to communicate what is found in excess, in moments where discourse and knowledge fail; in other words, in his *experience* which, although 'internal', must be communicated to the reader. In order to address this difficult integrality of Bataille's work, I pursue a focus on *transgression,* as the notion that serves to unify the different aspects of Bataille's thought and that brings out their fundamental connection. Transgression signifies the moment when the rational, discursive universe is abolished and temporality is measured in terms of the present, replacing future concern - necessarily linked to usefulness and accumulation - by unproductive expenditure. Its fundamental value on an existential level, highlighted in the content of his work, is accompanied by another level, by the very act of writing where language is itself disrupted. This paradoxical project of writing that which exceeds language is in need of another narrative, that of *fiction*, whose reading cannot be separated from the theoretical ideas underlining it and vice versa. In this thesis, Bataille's novels are treated as a direct source of his thought, bringing to the fore the importance of the reader as having an active role in his project of communicating what he calls an *inner experience.* The thesis is divided into two parts: in the first I approach Bataille's theoretical writings via a

series of related themes: economics, sacrifice, inner experience and eroticism. In the second part, I approach these themes through successive chapters on Bataille's major fictional writings: *Story of the Eye, Madame Edwarda, Blue of Noon* and *My Mother.*

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the Department of French at King's College London which has provided me with an intellectual home where brilliant and inspiring ideas always run freely, and always parallel to my own journey of completing this thesis.

I am especially thankful to my primary supervisor Patrick ffrench, whose support and guidance have been immensely invaluable and whose office often felt like a safe haven where my thoughts would finally acquire a much needed coherence. I would also like to thank my secondary supervisor Hector Kollias, whose advice and precious insight provided me with a perspective that would not have otherwise emerged.

To Dimitris Karambelas, whose support and encouragement since my Undergraduate Degree at the University of Athens led me to pursue an academic path, and to Maria Prodromou, who first introduced me to the seductive thought of Georges Bataille, I am most thankful.

I must also mention Akanksha Mehta, Royyuru Avinash, Pavithra Rallapalli, Rodrigo Torres and Annita Papazachariou for their support and friendship, as well as Spyros Sypsas, for his insight and limitless encouragement, and Deepak Nair, whose perspective and 'reading' has productively contributed to that of my own. I am thankful to all of them.

Finally, I am grateful to my brother, George Tzirkotis, who has always been a source of inspiration, and to my parents, Alexandros and Anna Tzirkoti, whose unconditional love and support, in every sense of the word, have made my PhD. possible. This thesis is dedicated to them.

Introduction

The work of Georges Bataille has triggered interest amongst academics, artists, novelists, historians, even economists. Across his multiform and scattered writings he had in fact dealt with all of the above fields, adding his own contribution to each of them. He himself, however, often discouraged others from perceiving his writings and evaluating them from a strictly scientific point of view, as he was also reluctant to accept any specific title for himself. The title of the philosopher may seem to be the more fitting, but Bataille argues that philosophy also belongs to those disciplines that can only approach the issues that concern humanity most deeply from an *external* perspective. The title of the novelist, on the other hand, may appear equally fitting considering Bataille's fictional legacy, but it is also inaccurate, in the sense that it neglects the basic unifying train of thought that guides this fiction and consists of its foundation and precondition. It is across and between the two 'poles' or 'modes' of theory and fiction that Bataille's writing works, and this is how I have approached it in this thesis.

A different way to systematise Bataille's corpus in a convenient duality would be to divide it into 'fiction' and 'non-fiction'. This division has the advantage of including the same word in both categories, highlighting thus the unity between them, but it also has the precarious effect of implying a bias towards the superiority of fiction. The same goes for a division that favours 'theory' as opposed to 'non-theory', again positing the problem not only of qualitative superiority, but also of a pseudo-temporal problem of which comes first: the theory or the fiction? This 'chicken and egg' problematic has real implications in any study on Bataille, as the researcher is directly and from the very beginning confronted with a fundamental problem, which is that of

methodology. However, this is the same problem that Bataille faces himself, and it is alongside this problem that he writes. Every book, every essay and every novel is a direct or indirect attempt to deal with the difficulty of writing about excess. The solution, ultimately, lies in the problem itself. Instead of eliminating the difficulty, Bataille embraces it. Instead of writing about excess, he writes excess. His very name, if names have any significance, offers an illuminating analogy for his attitude towards his work. Bataille battles by becoming battle himself: *I am myself war* takes on a very literal meaning in this context.[1] Faced with the question of how to write that which is situated beyond writing as the expression of language and reason, in other words of how to reconcile content and methodology when the latter is fundamentally opposed to the former, the answer is equally paradoxical: the problem of content *is* that of methodology, and vice versa. The two existing poles do not contradict each other but in their differences they manage to illustrate their integral connection.

In this thesis I argue that the aforementioned unifying factor is the notion of *transgression.* To begin with, transgression is found *in* Bataille's work as an issue of content with several chapters devoted to this subject both in a direct didactic manner as part of his books - in the *Accursed Share* as well as in *Eroticism* - in a less evident way in essays such as 'The Solar Anus' or 'The Big Toe', as well as in more idiosyncratic writings such as *Inner Experience* and *On Nietzsche.* In Bataille's fictional texts, transgression is also manifested or effected through the use of language, and by way of the actions and movements of characters in the course of the *récit.* However, transgression, emerging as a problem of content in all of these different contexts, reveals that the boundaries between these contexts are themselves blurred; the distinction between theory and fiction is itself affected by the peculiar nature of

[1] Georges Bataille, 'The Practice of Joy Before Death' in *Visions of Excess*, ed. Allan Stoekl, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2008, p. 239

transgression; in other words, the diminishing of limits that transgression implies does not leave the relation between theory and fiction unaffected but highlights its complexity further, blurring the lines that separate one from the other.

On another level, *between* theory and fiction, transgression takes on the meaning of a methodological unifying tool. As if echoing the content, transgression is what eliminates difference, opening up the way to *communication.* This term signifies a process that occurs beyond discourse, and furthermore, it demands that all knowledge is lost. Contrary to what immediately comes to mind upon encountering this term, i.e. a mediated exchange of information between human beings that leads to a certain understanding (or even misunderstanding) of each other, communication here functions precisely at the point where understanding is diminished. Bataille is in search of a notion that 'connects' human beings without the aid of language, a connection that is unmediated and as such does not produce meaning but rather its opposite. Everything that is found beyond meaning is also beyond utility, in the sense that it escapes the chain that links everything in the world according to its (useful) function. Beyond the useful lies the field of the excessive, that which cannot be assimilated or homogenised, and the very fact of its necessary exclusion from the homogeneous forms its inherent characteristic. In other words, if excess becomes comprehended, absorbed into a system of knowledge that can provide it with a definition that obeys the rules of homogenised utility, it loses the right to be called excess; it is not excessive anymore. This is the major problem that Bataille faces especially on the issue of *communicating* his work. If he himself has found a way out of the impasse of writing by writing from within excess, this is only half of the solution. The written text is incomplete without its natural pairing with the reader who takes up the act of reading it. Reading the text then, is what fulfils its destiny which is otherwise left at an incomplete state. However, the dynamic of this relationship is always informed by the paradox that lies at the center of Bataille's work:

to read his text is not to complete its supposed task, to decide on its meaning and close it off, but to leave it open at all costs. To read Bataille while remaining faithful to his excessive writing is to refuse the temptation of altering its nature, in other words of turning excess into its opposite, its homogenisation inside the rules of language and rationality. In short, to read Bataille is to *read excess*, in the same way that he *writes excess.* In this relationship, communication takes on the meaning intended by its author, in the very act of reading.

The reader interested in Bataille can, of course, absorb information about sacrifice and the sacred, about sexuality, eroticism, prostitution, about the philosophy of Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, as well as prehistoric art, modern literature, poetry, to name but a few of his preoccupations. In this vast array of themes, knowledge is undoubtedly exchanged and communicated, and it would be wrong to dismiss the academic value of his writings. However, it is equally wrong to dismiss the communication that occurs as a result of the breakdown of knowledge. And this is most strikingly manifested in texts that are written 'in fury'- as he states in the preface of *Blue of Noon* – texts whose 'transgressive' character is in accordance with the implication that this term proposes.[2] To clarify, I argue that as well as having an exhilarating, or rather, anguished and even nauseating effect on the reader, this effect has a theoretical value of its own. Bataille's fictional works, or texts such as *Inner Experience*, that manage to blur the lines between a way of communication that depends on rationality as opposed to one that depends on its disappearance, are valuable examples of how theory is always embedded in fiction and vice versa. 'Theory' in this instant is used, for lack of a better term, to signify the intrinsic connection that these writings have to the totality of his thought. The latter demands, in a yet again paradoxical way, that it is never perceived as a finished system of knowledge but as an unfinished one, marked by the experience of the limit which in

[2] Georges Bataille, *Blue of Noon*, Marion Boyars, 2006, p. 153

Bataille's views emerges at the foundation of humanity. It is this limit that is made manifest in these 'transgressive' writings, and it is for this reason that they are labelled as such. If they are indeed transgressing a limit, be it that of sexuality, social norms, or even of language and the text itself, that also means that they are allowing this limit to be seen, or more precisely *experienced.* When the limit is transgressed it is also, and perhaps more importantly, manifested more clearly.

In this sense, there are two ways for approaching Bataille's work: we could call the first one *external*, in that it corresponds to a reading that focuses on and evaluates the ideas that touch upon fields more comfortably placed under the 'academic' spectrum. These are more easily detected in works that I have chosen to include in the first 'theoretical' part of this thesis, such as the three volumes of *The Accursed Share, Eroticism, Inner Experience* as well as essays like 'The Notion of Expenditure' and 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism'. In dealing with Bataille's texts in this way, the reader is able to employ all of her intellectual tools in order to understand, criticise, and evaluate them. The second way to approach Bataille could be called *internal,* a term that echoes the 'inner' quality of 'inner experience'- a central term in his work and one that consists of the title of his book *Inner Experience* - and that is faithful to its demands. This reading is indispensable for approaching the fictional texts in particular, where what is being communicated is experience itself. Moreover, it is ultimately the combination of these two 'ways of reading' that can offer us Bataille's work most fully; the 'internal' reading of fiction informs the 'external' reading of theory, exposing a cyclical relation between them in the light of which the texts can be read. The fact that what is produced to the reader in her 'internal' approach is an affective reaction rather than a strictly intellectual contemplation does not mean that it should not also be understood, criticised and evaluated; it should, although in a different manner. Instead

of the reader trying to invest her reaction with a form, with 'a mathematical frock coat'[3] that would force it back into discourse and to the comfortable language of rationality, she could appreciate the very fact of its excessive nature, allowing for the combination of fiction and theory to reveal the paradoxical position of excess in the text.

One of the most common reactions to the reading of *Story of the Eye* for example, is a strong sense of vertigo, or ungroundedness, of a space where objective reality is unable to offer a safe, meaningful, knowledge generating platform. In *Blue of Noon* also, this sense of not having a firm ground on which to stand is illustrated in various scenes in a way that it is passed on from the protagonists to the reader. In *Madame Edwarda* what is at stake is the loss of knowledge, of the protagonist's ability to make sense of and narrate the events that are taking place. Similarly, *My Mother* exposes the narrative as opening up outside and beyond meaning, escaping thus the very definition of narrative itself. The sense of vertigo that accompanies the reader in these writings offers a 'definition' of excess that is, paradoxically, non definitional. In other words, this effect offers the aforementioned 'internal' perspective, which, by employing a different language, manages to express the same notions as a definitional, theoretical language; in this case excess. It is in this back and forth from fiction to theory that excess is communicated, in the unique way in which the notion of excess comes to be perceived without compromising its place neither in the context of 'transgressive' fiction, nor in that of 'explanatory' theory.

Bataille's work cannot be considered as a whole unless this affective reading, one that effectively transgresses the limits of rationality, is taken into account. This is what poses of course a fundamental problem to the researcher and critic, as what needs to be taken into account is precisely that ultimately, commentary is excluded altogether by this approach. 'I write for one, who, entering into my book, would fall into it as into

[3] Georges Bataille, 'Formless' in *Visions of Excess*, p. 31

a hole, who would never again get out', Bataille writes in *Inner Experience.*[4] But one cannot comment from inside the hole. This is an extended invitation towards the reader to meet the writer inside the space where his thoughts emanate, to share in other words the experience from which and through which he writes. If this space is a hole from which neither will ever again get out, how will the reader be able to become a critic, a commentator? This is the same problem that the narrator of *Madame Edwarda* is brought against: when faced with the divine, he desperately tries to rationalise it, to insert it into a discourse that he can understand and in this way objectify it, own it. In a similar way, the reader is brought against the problem of how to perceive a text that its own writer has urged against any rationalising process. The narrator 'loses his head' in the last pages of *Madame Edwarda,* understanding finally that it is by letting go of knowledge that he can reach Edwarda's 'secret'; in other words, he *stops* understanding, and what he ends up knowing is only that 'non-knowledge communicates ecstasy', as Bataille explores in *Inner Experience.*[5] The narrator then, finds a 'solution' to his problem by giving up on narration, or rather, on his authority as narrator. But what is the reader to do? She also has to give up on her authority over the text, if she is to reach the text's secret. Thus is created the ongoing problem that Bataille's researcher faces, the author of this thesis not excluded.

The critic, the commentator, is placed by necessity in a position of authority over the text. It is only from this position that one can write *on* anything. However, the critic is first and foremost a reader, partaking in this reader/writer relationship that opens up communication at the limit of knowledge. It is this communication that she perceives and that is ultimately illustrated in any form of study on Bataille. Moreover, as his own work is never completed but is always in a state of opening up to excess,

[4] Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience,* State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 116
[5] *Ibid*., p. 58

similarly the ongoing research on Bataille instead of closing off the subject, contributes to its remaining forever incomplete, that is, faithful to the argument that a scientific approach cannot provide a definitive answer to the fundamental issues of humanity. If Bataille writes excess, communicating experience, the reader reads excess, and what she communicates is also this experience. In this manner, this thesis presents alongside with an endeavour to clarify Bataille's major concepts of transgression and communication, an attempt to situate them in their position inside the very act of reading. Through this act, terms that derive their significance from excess, get appropriated in a way that reveals their 'practical' effect, that is, their 'real time' immediate impact, beyond theory, outside science, 'as they happen'.

Bataille has a place in the intellectual history of humanity not only because of his contribution to all kinds of academic fields, but, I argue, more importantly, despite of it. It is the self-negating power of his thought that is so appealing, for it transforms thinking *about* something to thinking *for its own sake.* In other words, he includes in human nature what is traditionally left outside, that is, anything that defies the dry, strict scientific discourse. Reading excess ultimately signifies that excess is capable of being read; as it is capable of being written. The anthropological argument that Bataille exhibits for the foundation of humanity at the experience of its limit, presupposes that the human limits can be broadened so as to include what lies beyond them; and this can be manifested in the very act of reading the limit. Writing and reading at the limit, make manifest the fact that the human condition can include a broader perspective that is found beyond a strict interpretation of humanity. To read, and consequently to comment on Bataille, is not to attempt an interpretation that will contribute to its deciphering, to its 'once and for all' settling of what there is to be settled. On the contrary, it is a constant contribution to the 'unfinishedness' of his thought.

There is of course one very simple solution to this problem: the written text can remain in this unfinished state by not being read. This is probably the safest means to reach incompleteness, by avoiding any definition and any commentary; but it would be equivalent to the author never writing anything in the first place. It would be equal to solving the problem by not approaching it at all. Bataille, however, does not give up on the problem as he addresses it in the most direct way: if the limit is too narrow to include what lies beyond it, then it must be broadened. In other words, if language is too 'poor' to express something that escapes it, it is language itself that should be manipulated in order for a way through to be found; non-inclusion of the unsayable would be equal to admitting defeat. In the same way, the text that is read is a tackling of the issue in a bold manner, that is, facing the problem directly. Adding to the literature therefore, does not constitute another step towards closure, but another proof of the impossibility of reaching closure. Every time that Bataille is being read and commented on, the impossibility of his thought is manifested via the experience of the reader. Reading excess is closer to *sharing* this experience, *as* experience, rather than transmitting attained knowledge; or rather, the knowledge that is attained is this experience itself, forcing the term 'knowledge' to become broader, encompassing in this way something that lies beyond its limits.

In this thesis the problem that the researcher faces and which, I will suggest, is the same that Bataille faces himself - reading excess in the first instance and writing excess in the second - is treated as a direct and invaluable outcome of his thought. Excess, by definition not being able to be assimilated in any normalising discourse, presents the reader with only two possible reactions: she can either neglect it, bypass it completely, or assimilate it by force, by inserting it into a theoretical framework that becomes a normalised discourse. However, a third reaction, which constitutes a direct affective response to Bataille's writings is, I will argue, one that most faithfully

corresponds to what these writings expose. To treat Bataille's work as a whole is ultimately to recognise the impossibility of this wholeness. This means that theory and fiction inform one another in such a way that finally, the distinction between them exposes that which unites them, and which, most importantly, obscures their limits. The notion of 'transgression', situated in the middle of fiction and theory, expressed in Bataille's thought in many different instances – by means of explanation or definition, as well as in fictional scenes that are described as 'transgressive', in poems, essays, and also texts that stand right at the limit of fiction and non-fiction - is ideal for highlighting this important relation. This is the reason why in this thesis I have chosen to approach the issue of reading Bataille via this notion; understanding transgression in its different forms of communication reveals how this notion ultimately annihilates difference, the difference between meaning and non-meaning not excluded.

If reading excess is impossible, then this impossibility should be maintained and appreciated as such. I hope to demonstrate in the following chapters how a reading of this kind, that respects Bataille's paradoxical work as a necessarily unfinished corpus, can be illuminated by an analysis of the notion of transgression in his theory as well as his fiction, by keeping in mind that the dynamic between these two domains is itself the key for such a reading. The seemingly straightforward ideas presented in Bataille's theory are always informed by the obscurity of his fiction and vice versa, so that reading Bataille in the sense of 'interpreting' his thought is not a viable option. To interpret transgression in Bataille is to overlook the fact that it is inherently connected to another notion, that of *communication*. What transgression manifests is that a communication is possible that exceeds the narrow limits of language, of the text, and that is precisely established at the level of reading, or rather of the dynamic relationship that exists between reading and writing. If transgression is experience, it is this experience that is being communicated in the aforementioned relationship. Between the writer and the

reader, the text consists of a real barrier that cannot help but separate them in the most concrete way. However, immediacy arises from the fact that notions such as transgression and communication are, instead of being explained or described to the reader, transferred to her as an experience that arises through the very act of reading.

In this thesis I hope to demonstrate that reading Bataille, when it is equal to reading excess, is an act whose value lies in the illumination of Bataille's concepts themselves. In other words, it is by reading transgression that this notion acquires its meaning, for what it signifies is an experience, and therefore it must be lived, it must be 'practiced'. In following this notion from its theoretical framework to its fictional framework, this necessity is glimpsed as part of Bataille's project; that this project is first and foremost a non-project, an escape from utility and ultimately from the act of writing itself, is not something that should discourage its pursuit. I will argue that Bataille can be read alongside this impossible project, contributing thus to its impossibility.

This thesis' contribution is in this sense, one towards this impossibility, in so far as I hope to demonstrate that reading excess has an immense value as a major part of Bataille's thought, and one that is, moreover, manifested most clearly with the aid of the reader herself. Regarding Bataille's theory, with which I am engaging in the first part of the thesis, I aim to show that transgression is a notion that, although it appears in different instances and in different contexts, it retains ultimately a universality that allows it to traverse this difference while simultaneously maintaining it, revealing an enduring fundamental unity. I approach Bataille's theoretical writings with the aim to identify the factor that serves as a unifying tool between them; the notion of transgression, read as having the qualities of this unifying factor, highlights Bataille's project as an anthropological one, one that is concerned with 'what is fundamentally human'. With this approach I hope to contribute to a reading of Bataille's ideas that is in

this sense ‘general’, this term echoing his own understanding of generality as a condition that refuses a perspective dictated by the restrictions of the limits set by humanity itself. This presupposes that it is, for example, inaccurate to describe Bataille as ‘the author of the erotic’, for the erotic in this approach, is only a manifestation of humanity’s fundamental existence, from which it cannot be distinguished and treated separately. Moreover, perceiving Bataille as an anthropologist concerned with what is fundamental in the human condition, forces us to treat his fictional writings as direct sources, where this quest is continued. Fiction in this sense, is another language, another tool for reaching the same objective. Therefore, as in Bataille’s view, what is fundamental in humanity is its being at the limit, it is this limit that is revealed via the language of fiction, and it is revealed in such a way that it is manifested *as limit*: in a manner that is direct, the same way that experience is also direct for the one who is living it. By approaching fiction as the continuation of Bataille’s endeavour to express the human condition as it is at the limit, in other words, as a continuation of the same non-project that his theoretical writings engage with, this thesis contributes to a reading that is not restrictive in regards to the way that it should be perceived. I argue that beyond the interpretation of the text, or the interpretation of the themes, there is another kind of reading which, always informed by theory, allows excess to be manifested. In this sense, reading one of Bataille’s texts, or rather reading its excess is, paradoxically, equal to reading the whole of his corpus: wholeness is only achieved in incompleteness, and for Bataille, the ideal reader is one who will maintain this incompleteness rather than seal it off in a definitive conclusion.

In order to address the problem of reading Bataille’s work as a whole, I have taken as a guideline the notion of transgression. In the first part of the thesis this notion is identified inside Bataille’s major theoretical works, in an attempt to clarify its position *in* this theoretical framework. Chapter one deals with the theme of Expenditure

and the Sacred, where the concern for an anthropological 'general' argument about humanity can be glimpsed. In the three volumes of *The Accursed Share* transgression emerges as a general 'requirement' for humanity that is contrasted to a more specific analysis of phenomena such as fascism and the bourgeoisie, previously dealt with in earlier essays like 'The Notion of Expenditure' and 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism'. The tension between the general 'ahistorical' and the specific 'historical', more than blurring the line that separates them, illustrates the necessity for a combined view of the general and the specific. Bataille, by addressing the specific issues of his time, the most striking of which is the analysis of fascism, not only accepts the challenge of positioning himself against them, but also points to the fact that there exists a unifying factor in the history of humanity, which lies in the center of humanity itself: in the human being. When he discusses the 'psychological structure of fascism', his study is not disconnected from a bigger picture of humanity but it is treated as a question whose answer is to be found (or at least looked for) therein. However, 'what is human' for Bataille consists of the very first question that needs to be contemplated, and this is the reason why in every specific instance of humanity, its foundations need to be considered as well. Transgression is illuminated in this instance as a link between the general and the specific, for it is first and foremost, found in both. Expenditure, seen as a fundamental need to spend, to actively lose rather than to save and accumulate, consists of a principle that is in complete contradiction with the established, traditional view of economy. When Bataille suggests that expenditure and the power to lose is what drives humanity as a force that runs across the totality of the universe, he is proposing an economics that defies human rationality itself. By opposing the usefulness of accumulation he is opposing the very principles that human beings view themselves as based upon. Therefore, to challenge them is to challenge the notion of what it is to be human, to transgress in other words, the limits that enclose us in a limited perspective.

This is seen more clearly in the three volumes of *The Accursed Share* where the argument for a universal value of transgression can be extracted in its relation to sacrifice and its ability to operate as a stage for dramatisation, as well as a more abstract metaphorical structure. This relationship introduces notions such as continuity, intimacy and communication, which are crucial for my theoretical apprehension on transgression, and are approached with the aid of texts such us *Eroticism* and *Theory of Religion.* Furthermore, the notion of the sacred and its connection to non-discursive communication is discussed within the framework of *The College of Sociology* as well as the secret society of *Acéphale,* where the concern for the creation of a community is taken up both on a theoretical level and as an attempt for a 'real life' practice of this theory. With the aid of texts related to the College of Sociology, as well as Giorgio Agamben's notion of '*whatever reader*' we can see how a community of readers is created every time Bataille is read, that is in accordance with the demand for a communication that is beyond discourse and beyond any authority, in the same way that the group of *Acéphale* is a headless group, one that has no leader as the absolute authoritarian figure.

On this last issue, the text of *Inner Experience* is invaluable for understanding how Bataille was able to propose such a communication by defining experience as authority that 'expiates itself',[6] and it is the main focus of my next chapter. The notion of inner experience is crucial in this instance, not only for the clarification of transgression and communication in this regard, but also because this text constitutes the perfect sample of what we can call 'written excess'. Inner experience is being written in two levels: as a notion that has to be illustrated, and as a lived experience that has to be put into words, communicated to the reader. Theory and practice are exposed in this text as being two intrinsic parts of the same problematic. It is because of this

[6] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 7

relationship that the text operates as a space where communication between the writer and reader occurs via the text, but at the same time beyond it. Jean-Luc Nancy's essay 'Exscription' is discussed here in connection to Bataille's text, in order to support the argument that communication occurs beyond the meaning of the text, at the moment of its sharing, as *exposure* to non-meaning; and for this, the reader's role is indispensable, for it is with her at the other end of the relationship that a destruction of meaning is established.[7]

In the third and final chapter of the first, theoretical part, eroticism is discussed as the embodiment of the idea of transgression, as the inner experience par excellence, and therefore as a major contribution to the clarification of the theoretical notions of both transgression and communication. However, this very position of eroticism as an experience first and foremost, renders its own writing an issue as significant and urgent as its content. *What is eroticism* and *how to write it* are presented as the same problem. Content and methodology both need to be addressed at the same time, for the issue that lies at the core of Bataille's thought remains unresolved: an experience at the limit can only be thought of at the limit, and consequently can only be written at the limit. In *Eroticism,* Bataille offers a theoretical as well as historical account of the erotic, while at the same time, the structure of the book itself hints at the nature of the erotic as an experience. In this sense, this text consists of a guideline towards eroticism as experience, for it makes manifest the fact that although it can be approached from several perspectives, its nature still remains outside of discourse. This is not to propose that Bataille writes in vain, but that eroticism is in need of a different language, perhaps the language of fiction, as is hinted in his decision to end *Eroticism* with the inclusion of the preface to *Madame Edwarda.* Apart from *Eroticism,* the last two volumes of *The*

[7] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Exscription', in *Yale French Studies*; *On Bataille, Number 78*, ed. Allan Stoekl, Yale University Press, 1990, p. 47

Accursed Share as well as 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' serve as sources for the clarification of Bataille's account of the 'couple', which has a prominent position in the theme of the erotic. The couple in love, or the 'world of lovers' which consists of its state, is contrasted to that of the community with the aid of Nancy's *Inoperative Community* as well as Maurice Blanchot's response to the latter, in his *Unavowable Community.*[8] The latter, with a detailed discussion of Marguerite Duras' *The Malady of Death* also hints at the importance of the language of fiction in the writing (as well as the reading) of excess.[9] In blurring the lines between theory and fiction, their relation is seen as a step towards treating eroticism as an excessive notion, one that, in this sense, escapes the limits of its own interpretation.

The importance of fiction and its imperative role in reading Bataille's work as a whole is precisely the subject of the second part of this thesis. The cyclical relation between theory and fiction is highlighted, as the latter is constantly informed by the same notions that preoccupy Bataille in texts with a more explanatory aim. Ultimately, fiction and theory both contribute to a process that far from providing a rational account of what excess is, reveal this process as an endless opening up of the question, while, paradoxically, also providing the answer in the same manner. When Bataille ends his theoretical study on eroticism with the preface to a fictional work, the fluidity of his thought is exposed as one that, paradoxically, has no end. The ending of *Eroticism* is more than an ending an opening up towards fiction; and in a cyclical manner, fiction never offers an ending but keeps opening up itself to excess, therefore leading the reader back to theory, back to the very notion of excess, and ultimately, to the fact that existence at the limit is signaled first and foremost by an uncontrollable resistance to closure. The movement from theory to fiction is not that of linearity. The riddles that

[8] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, Station Hill Press, 1988
[9] Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, Grove Press New York, 1986

Bataille sets out to solve in his theoretical texts are not answered by his fictional texts; on the contrary, fiction is presented as being the riddle itself, and it is as such that it is offered to the reader: as a riddle not to be solved but to be shared, in a community that finally exists beyond the significance or meaning. The community of readers created in the space that Bataille's fiction opens up exists because of its impossibility, in the transgression of the limit of language itself, in and through the transgressive images and narratives that are being read.

In the first chapter of this second part of my thesis I consider the way that *Story of the Eye* functions as a source of anxiety, in its own terms, with anxiety being the central mood of the novel, as well as the direct effect that it has on the reader. In clarifying the notion of anxiety and its relation to transgression I discuss Martin Heidegger's views on this subject as they are illustrated in *Being and Time* where anxiety is seen as inextricably connected with the objects that make up the rational world and which, in *Story of the Eye* are manipulated in a spectacular way. Moreover, psychoanalytic views on anxiety offered by Sigmund Freud as well as Adam Phillips are taken into account in order to identify Bataille's own position on the theme of anxiety. Bataille's most well known fictional work is treated as a direct source of his ideas where, through the language of fiction, the condition of humanity is glimpsed while it is, equally importantly, experienced. When considered under the perspective of anxiety as an existential notion, transgression can be seen as confirming Bataille's theoretical concerns for its universal value as a fundamental human condition. That is to say that, despite the explicitly sexual character of the themes that are explored in the *récit,* what remains and endures, what the reader perceives and carries with her in the final analysis, is a feeling of void that goes beyond sexuality; or more accurately, that perceives sexuality not as a specific aspect of humanity treated separately, but as its fundamental inextricable part. Bataille's own views expressed in *Eroticism* as well as in essays such

as ‘The Sacred’, are considered with the purpose of highlighting the experience of the loss of ground that the protagonists, and in a parallel way, the reader, experience. The latter’s experience or her reaction towards what she is reading is in accordance with the loss of meaning that is manifested in this instance in the blending of the objects in *Story of the Eye* which ultimately leads to a disappearance of objective reality, to the annihilation of meaning.

The sense of void that is being transmitted to the reader in the form of the loss of objective reality in *Story of the Eye* is discussed further in the following chapter, with the analysis of *Blue of Noon.* Here, the *récit* is filled with instances of ungroudedness which, moreover, correspond to the structure of the novel and its dispersed temporality. The main axes of politics and sexuality highlight the fact that there exists a state of ‘in between’, as these seemingly contradictory aspects merge into each other and are presented as inseparable. This ambiguity can and should exist as a state on its own terms. The protagonist’s ambiguous or liquid state opens up a space where difference is annihilated in a reversal that confuses what is low/base with what is high/elevated. This confusion leads to an illustration of what non-knowledge is and how it can be expressed in language, and in the language of fiction specifically. Following Bataille’s account of experience in *Inner Experience,* together with *Eroticism* as well as essays that are concerned with the themes of laughter and tears and their excessive qualities, a reading of *Blue of Noon* that is itself at the limit is revealed as necessary. Transgression in this instance is seen as the moment that annuls difference in the *récit* as well as the moment when the reader herself perceives lack of closure as a requirement for non-knowledge and consequently as a condition for the experience of reading excess.

As the idea of non-knowledge is manifested as central in this successive reading of Bataille’s major fictional works, it constitutes the main subject of my next chapter devoted to *Madame Edwarda* where knowing and un-knowing become crucial for both

the course of the *récit* and the way in which it is perceived by the reader. Non-knowledge is approached with a reading of *Inner Experience*, the text that *Madame Edwarda* is, according to its author, inextricably connected to, as the latter is read as a journey from meaning to non-meaning in two occasions: on the first level, throughout the narrative it is the journey of the narrator within the events that occur, and on a second level, in the course of the meta-narrative, it is the journey that the reader takes as she responds to the narrator's attempt to verbalise these events. In both levels, it is experience that is being communicated, in the act of writing as well as in the act of reading, and from this follows that a specific kind of reading is demanded from Bataille: one that does not close off the text but that leaves it infinitely open. Reading Bataille's fiction in general, and *Madame Edwarda* in particular, is equal to sharing a secret, the same secret that informs the narrative, the meta-narrative and the preface of this specific text. When knowledge itself is contested, the very act of reading is contested; to pursue this issue I have chosen to engage with another fictional work, Duras' *The Malady of Death,* as well as Blanchot's discussion of the latter and the significance that a community of readers has on both this text and *Madame Edwarda.*

In the final chapter of the second part of the thesis, I engage with a reading of *My Mother,* which, because of its incestuous themes offers, I will argue, a direct example of transgressing a fundamental taboo and the implications that this has for the reader. The oedipal myth is a narrative on which the subject is founded, and along with it, its power for narration itself is born. Every story in this sense is an affirmation of the oedipal subject which is able to narrate because of its being subjected to the crime and punishment that Oedipus has suffered. To support this view I will discuss Julia Kristeva's essay 'Bataille, Experience and Practice'. In Bataille's case in general and in *My Mother* in particular, the oedipal myth more than affirming this narrative, is bound to destroy it. Incest is read not as puzzle to be solved by science, as is suggested in

Eroticism, but as a specific aspect of the general problem of sexuality, one that is inextricably connected with the human condition. In this approach, it is crucial to employ a reading that is able to overcome the limits of society, culture, and the law of Oedipus itself. I argue that Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* as well his views on expressed in the essay 'The Third Meaning' can offer an insight on the reading of *My Mother* with the analysis of the eye of the *punctum,* one that sees beyond rationality, in a manner that is deeply personal, and which is contrasted to Barthes' previous reading of *Story of the Eye,* which can be said to be conducted with the eye of the *studium.* Bataille's contributions to *The Critical Dictionary* with entries such as 'The Eye' and 'Formless' are also discussed in order to support the necessity for a different kind of vision that is, ultimately, similar to the one that the reader employs when faced with fiction as excess.

I hope to demonstrate that reading Bataille's fiction as part of his general attempt to identify what is most fundamental in humanity, namely its being at the limit, presupposes a constant back and forth from theory to fiction which results ultimately in reading the limit itself. Resisting a closing off of the text necessarily leads to a constant engagement with Bataille's work, in other words, to a constant engagement with its excess. *My Mother* is a text that is not finished itself, and this is one of the reasons I chose to end this thesis with this particular novel. Its being unfinished is in accordance with the general flow of Bataille's ideas, whose apparent disparity and diversity is in the final stage reconciled by the unifying notion of transgression. The latter, being ultimately the notion that overcomes the limits of humanity while at the same time signifying the moment when they are manifested most clearly, lies at the center, or *between* fiction and theory, highlighting the fact that they both belong to an ongoing endeavour to glimpse humanity in its 'wholeness'. That this is attempted via words, with books, with essays and novels, is indicative of the necessity for a reader that will

manage to read beyond the words, by reading in them not their meaning, but their excess. Returning to theory, to the notion of transgression and to the opening up to a communication that is non-discursive, signals the existence of link between Bataille's theory and fiction that is excessive itself, and it is as such that it must be read and maintained. Ultimately, reading Bataille, reading excess, is taking part in the theory itself, 'understanding' it in the paradoxical Bataillean sense where meaning becomes the absence of meaning; for if Bataille struggles to communicate the limit, by writing the limit, at the limit, it is the reader, experiencing the limit that confirms the 'meaning' of communication.

Part One: Theoretical Writings

Chapter One: Expenditure and the Sacred

The notion of expenditure is one of the key concepts in Bataille's thought, as it has the ability to bring together different domains such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, as well as philosophy and economics. In his writings, Bataille himself engages with themes as diverse as the origins of man's commercial activities, the problem of fascism and its affective nature, as well as the meaning and implications of the Marshall Plan. Expenditure is the concept that lies at the basis of each of these topics, making manifest the fact that at the core of Bataille's thought there exists the unifying theme of the general condition of humanity, an 'anthropological' concern which attends to the fact of man. Bataille's diversity and mobility as a writer is evident in the way in which he engages with problems that arise under specific historical conditions, but the underlying factor is almost always located in something that in a way exceeds history, or more accurately, anticipates it. That is because the foundation of humanity is always an issue that unavoidably shapes what is human from the very beginning. In this sense, Bataille the anthropologist is side by side with the philosopher, critic and novelist, as he reconciles the universal problems of the birth of humanity with the specific issues that human beings deal with, *as human beings.* In this thesis, notions such as transgression and expenditure are considered as part of Bataille's anthropological endeavour to take into account and evaluate man's position in the world he inhabits, starting from the most basic question, of *what it is that makes us human.* These notions are in a sense the tools that can begin to provide an answer to this question, one that is in no way definitive, but that at least opens up a conversation on the general condition of humanity as well as the specific instances in which it is manifested. The fact that expenditure is the central notion in these instances that take the form of various disciplines is indicative of the wide spectrum of Bataille's work and its ability to reconcile themes

that seem irrelevant at first glance. Economics in this instant is used not for developing a strictly economical theory about a specific aspect of humanity, but to offer another perspective that can complete the human picture. The same stands for all the aforementioned disciplines, as they are each crystallised in a single concept to reveal a perspective that is more unified and complete.

In 'The Notion of Expenditure', published in 1933 in the journal *La Critique Sociale*, Bataille for the first time outlines his thoughts on expenditure, having as a point of departure the 'insufficiency of the principle of classical utility'.[10] His ideas are always contrasted to the rational system of civilised society which are constantly in the service of utility, of action that has a purpose only in so far as it contributes to the useful activity of humans. Putting forward his notion of unproductive expenditure, Bataille posits his views in a striking antithesis with the established order, challenging the established system of knowledge by suggesting that the entire economic system is based on false principles; false in the sense that they do not comply with humanity's 'true nature', which is the complete opposite of utility, that is, unproductive expenditure. He suggests therefore, an alternative view that is in accordance with humanity as a whole, where economy is an intrinsic part of something like a 'general theory of the human' rather than a separate external discipline that has been manufactured, after the fact, irrespectively of humanity's position in the universe.

This constant antithesis to order is fundamental not only to this specific argument but also to the general flow of Bataille's thought. It is a contrast that Bataille's line of thought needs in order to confirm his theory; human rules and limits are necessary for the very foundation of his thought, not only theoretically but also to the extent that they present him with the basic problem of writing his work: writing is the task of reason, it lies inside the sphere of productive activity and Bataille is constantly at

[10] Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', in *Visions of Excess*, p. 116

pains to explain the intermingling of reason with un-reason. In addition, therefore, to his antithesis to orthodox economics, Bataille is also faced with the problem of challenging the linguistic order on the one hand, and communicating his work through language on the other. His task is to write a 'general theory of the human', one that exceeds orthodox definitions, but his means (writing itself) necessarily falls under this definitions. In the same way that his subject exceeds the limits of traditionally defined humanity, his writing must correspond to this problem by exceeding its own limits, in so far as writing also comes up against the boundaries of rationality and reason.

This is evident not only in Bataille's theoretical, non-fictional work, but in his fiction as well, where the different 'levels' within the human condition are also evident. There is a constant play between what is rational and useful on the one hand, and what escapes utility on the other. The latter cannot be easily communicated via the medium of language, as this medium is essentially dedicated to the transmission of useful knowledge. Of course, in language, the boundaries of logic can be transgressed but this leads to the consequence of meaning being lost, or signifying something other than what the rules of rationality suggest. This is what poetry is able to do, or fiction in Bataille's universe, and in this respect fiction might be a more appropriate medium to express the inexpressible. However, Bataille does not turn his back on this major problem of the articulation of the inarticulate, but devotes several articles as well as a book (*The Accursed Share)* to this task, which could be said to be analogous to solving a riddle. In his fiction, on the other hand, his attitude is that of proposing riddles. This does not suggest that the enigmas proposed in fictional works are solved in the theoretical works, but is indicative rather of the fact that there cannot be a definitive narrative that provides an answer. It is the break of the narrative that has the power to illustrate the overcoming of limits that Bataille suggests is fundamental in humanity, and it is in the diversity and fragmentation of his writing that this limit is manifested. Thus, the opposition between

reason and un-reason, utility and unproductive expenditure, is not only the theoretical subject of his work, but also a real issue that Bataille has to face in the very act of writing. In the following chapters I will try to illustrate how this problem informs his theory as well as his fiction, for the way in which Bataille chooses to approach it is also the key to its solution. The problem of *writing* excess, always linked to that of *reading* excess, is ultimately 'solved', for lack of a better word, in this reciprocal relationship initiated by the very act of writing itself.

Bataille's main point in his first articulation of 'the notion of expenditure' seems difficult to take in, but it consists of a careful endeavour to explain something that is by its nature opposed to any rational explanation. His aim is to make a didactic point and to put his thought into words in a way that resembles the teaching of something that is unknown and not easily graspable. It consists of the argument that unproductive expenditure is fundamental in humanity, and it precedes the process of acquisition, as it was formed in our minds and expressed in the established scientific systems of understanding. In a system where the value of production as the means towards utility is deeply rooted in our minds as the only principle, he opposes the primacy of un-productivity, of free expenditure that answers to the principle of loss. Loss, is in his view more fundamental and even more desirable than the illusory balance of a peaceful world, and he manages to strengthen this argument by presenting a number of examples that prove the existence of unproductive activity in everyday life.

While humans are most of the time subordinated to the strict rules of utility, they often give reign to the principle of loss in the form of participation in cults such as sacrifice, games and also through the significance that jewels have in a society, together with the power of literature and theatre. Thus, while man strives to be, and thinks of himself as the obedient creature of utility, 'in the practice of life, however, humanity acts in a way that allows for the satisfaction of disarming savage needs, and it seems

able to subsist only at the limits of horror'.[11] Horror is the sole limit that can stand between him and his savage needs, once they have been unleashed. This seems to suggest that there are two kinds of limits: the ones set by humanity itself, posing rationality as a restriction to its wild urges, and the limit of horror, which is the ultimate point man can reach, and which protects him from crossing the line towards death; horror is the experience of death but of a being that is still alive, and therefore capable of experiencing it. Thus, the former kind is one that is 'artificial' in the sense that it is un-natural, in total contradiction to the flow of the universe, while the latter is the limit of a complete being, who is no longer restricted by its 'useful' needs, but by the ultimate peak of its human condition, that is, death. Bataille suggests that man can only 'truly' exist when facing this limit, at the strange position where he finds himself staring into the abyss that death signifies. The horror of death then, is not only what keeps him from directly falling into the abyss, but also a kind of necessity, the limit which he must experience in order to survive. This again points to Bataille's endeavour to approach the general problem of humanity, which is opposed to the restricted definitional system available via language, forced in this way to seek another system; one that in a way widens the existent limits that allows him to define the generality he is after in terms that correspond to this exact generality.

As Bataille continues to unravel his thought, he goes on after having established, through everyday examples, the 'social function of expenditure', to establish the economic value of unproductive expenditure and the way it influences society. To achieve that, he uses Mauss's celebrated essay on *The Gift* published in 1923, in a way that reveals the value of loss and destruction at the very beginnings of commerce in 'primitive' societies. Based on Mauss's analysis of the potlatch, Bataille is able to argue for a general economic theory whose principles favour expenditure rather than

[11] *Ibid*., p. 117

accumulation. Michèle Richman in *Reading Georges Bataille, Beyond the Gift,* suggests that the existence of potlatch and its 'violent agonistic confrontations', presented Bataille with the evidence for cultures that are actively giving, and that can support the view that to give, to spend, is more desirable and more beneficial than to save: 'Armed with evidence that social organisations were structured around the ceremonial expenditure of their *part maudite* – the excess invested into privileged goods destined for destruction – Bataille then proceeded with the formulation of a general economy based on the experience of *dépense*'.[12] In the potlatch's 'war of wealth', as Mauss describes it, giving is equal to destroying, and the ultimate effect of the potlatch would be not to be returned.

For Bataille, potlatch is not merely a form of gift-exchange, however violent and antagonistic, but more importantly the means for the acquisition of rank and honour, as well as the ritual dramatisation of death via the destruction of objects. By introducing the concept of the symbolisation of death in the equation, Bataille offers a connection between the gift and sacrifice, opening up the issue of non-discursive communication within a society. Destruction in unproductive expenditure is communication on a level outside reason, made possible by the (symbolised) collective confrontation of death. As Richman puts it, 'unlike Mauss in his perception of a decline of ethical integrity brought by the discrepancy between the "air" of pure *dépense* and the consequent reality of gain, Bataille is disturbed by the escalation of goods among participants. The experiential reality of destruction is supplanted by a quantified representation of sacrifice, and the original sentiment of loss, with its brutal proximity to death, is cushioned'.[13]

Bataille focuses on the nature of the gift as obligation and as destruction and its ability to bring out the characteristics of glory and nobility, essentially connected with

[12] Michele H. Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille, Beyond the Gift,* The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, pp.16-17
[13] *Ibid*., p.17

the power to lose. These anthropological observations situate economy as based not on utility, spending with an eye on the future of preservation, but rather on free expenditure, on the loss and destruction of the present. In this sense, unproductive expenditure is revealed as the foundation of human exchange and interaction. We could say, therefore that *in the beginning there was loss*. The paradoxical nature of this statement points to the fact that loss, in the sense of spending, losing, even destroying, is an active notion, where active spending consists of the priority, the end, whereas acquisition is merely the means towards this operation.

These observations are, however, extracted from the model of 'primitive' societies, which do not correspond to the facts of the present. As Bataille observes: 'Today the great and free forms of unproductive social expenditure have disappeared. One must not conclude from this, however, that the very principle of expenditure is no longer the end of economic activity'.[14] In bourgeois society nothing remains of the glory and generosity of expenditure; jealousy is the sole effect of wealth as its enjoyment and display only takes place privately, with no sign of its original excessive and orgiastic character: 'The contradiction of bourgeois culture, characterised by the supremacy of the commodity, is that it banishes the essential, that which induces fear and trembling from the world of things'.[15] But this is for Bataille the only difference between then and now. Social rank is still acquired by the power to expend, to lose one's wealth in an extravagant way, but since this takes place in privacy, the obligation associated with wealth has disappeared. This results is a society that has somehow gone astray, that has lost its contact with its original roots:

> Human life, distinct from juridical existence, existing as it does on a globe isolated in celestial space, from night to day and from one country to another –

[14] Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', p. 124
[15] Richman, *Beyond the Gift,* p. 22

> human life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by reasonable conception. The immense travail of recklessness, discharge, and upheaval that constitutes life could be expressed by stating that life starts only with the deficit of these systems.[16]

This passage serves as the beginning of the last chapter of 'The Notion of Expenditure', entitled 'The Insubordination of Material Facts'. After examining the past ('primitive' societies of agonistic economic type) and the present (the bourgeoisie and the class struggle), Bataille develops, as he often does, a general effect or conclusion of his views. These are *general* in that they are applicable to the whole of humanity, rather than to a particular group restricted by certain characteristics of space and time. Bataille's truth, here the primacy of expenditure, is thus universal and founded on the very beginning (or creation) of humanity. He seems to be concerned with what is essentially human and this is what introduces the aspect of universality to his thought. In placing the origins of human interaction in loss, he is able to lay the foundations of humanity in something negative; this means that what is essentially human for Bataille is, paradoxically, not human at all. It involves being at the limit of existence, where the traditional definitions of humanity are overshadowed by the principle of excess. The human condition is given to man by a negativity, by his being at the limit, and not by the established characteristics offered to him by the principle of utility. The man of utility was created, never given, at the specific moment of his decision to negate Nature in order to devote himself to work. In this context, the moment of negation signifies the creation of the world of utility, in other words, the world of work, of prohibitions, of profanity; this is the 'closed system assigned to it by reasonable conception'.[17] But life, according to Bataille consists of 'recklessness, discharge and upheaval', and starts only

[16] Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', p. 128
[17] *Ibid.*

at the deficit of the system of utility.[18] Bataille goes on to say that 'it is only by such insubordination [to the ends of utility] – even if it is impoverished – that the human race ceases to be isolated in the unconditional splendor of material things'.[19] There are, thus, for Bataille, certain 'requirements' for being truly human, and these consist of the paradoxical negation of what is considered as such. These requirements that Bataille suggests come up against the traditional definitional tendency of the rational world that humanity inhabits and are in this sense the locus where transgression takes place, in its opposition to the established rules. Exploring his views on the generality of the human condition as a fundamental aspect of Bataille's thought will be useful in clearing up the aspect of universality in his views and the effect this has on the notion on transgression.

Bataille's anthropological concerns revolve around what is most human in our humanity, or 'when' is it that we are wholly human. In pursuing his general argument we can situate where the notion of transgression stands in this process and how the universality of this logic is reconciled with specific events throughout history. According to Bataille, in order for humanity to be human, man needs to maintain a contact with his 'animal self'. This is never a return to animality but a condition established by a second negation (after the initial negation of Nature) of the very prohibitions that founded his creation as a creature of utility. Man breaks the rules he has set upon himself and which define his human qualities, as a conscious being, and with the desire to 'return' to Nature, or rather to the continuity of the natural universe. The transgression of humanity's limits brings to the fore the very opposite of the world of work, which is the world of violent destruction and unproductive expenditure, or the sacred world. Expenditure, of which the true meaning is only given in its unproductiveness, is exactly the negation of utility. Not only does it form, in economic

[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*

terms, the basis of human exchange, but it is also a passage to man's 'other side'. Given that the two worlds of profanity and the sacred are complementary, life can only be considered as life if it involves the passage from one to the other. The examples Bataille proposes of jewels, sacrifice and poetry serve as proof of this need to incorporate in the life of utility the movement of free expenditure, which is nothing other than the complete negation of this life. In the principle of expenditure, the transgression of man's rules is achieved, which are established in order to ensure his being as subordinate to utility, to the careful spending of material with an eye on the future.

Let's pursue this logic further, following Bataille's argument applied on the more concrete domain of the economy driven society. By analysing its economic principles, Bataille makes manifest the fact that society as a whole is driven by the same current. The principles of economy, according to his argument, are based on loss and this is in agreement with the general movement of the universe, and of humanity as part of it. In his journey through life, man has to 'bend' the rules of destruction, surrender his continuity for the sake of work and survival, but only in order to break them again, and enter the sphere of the sacred. Man's attitude resembles that of cheating, as he consciously negates his very negation, to render his life bearable. In the economic domain where this is most obvious, man manages to give way to expenditure, to his vital desire for unproductive spending. The present deterioration of this principle results in a society whose wealthy classes present 'a face so rapacious and lacking in nobility, so frighteningly small that all human life, upon seeing it, seems degraded'.[20] Human life that lacks the element of transgression is condemned to be subordinate to utility, separated at an immense distance from the concepts of glory and nobility which are themselves incorporated into the notion of expenditure and to the sacred world of transgression.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 125

If we move on now to 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', published in 1933 in the review *La Critique Sociale,* edited by the dissident Marxist Boris Souvarine, we see a continuation of Bataille's thoughts on expenditure presented in the earlier essay. Within the context of the review Bataille, faced with the challenge of his time, attempts an analysis of the fascist state based on the forms of attraction that emanate from its affective structure. Despite the Marxist character of the review and Souvarine's status as one of the founders of the French Communist Party in 1920, Bataille's essay can stand independently of its political aspect as a general analysis of the notion of fascism. However, the political thought underlying the essay is not only important for its reading but it also manifests the interconnection of politics with economy in a general and fundamental way. Despite the universal theoretical ideas that emerge from the essay, Bataille offers a historical account of fascism, focusing on the current problems and seeking their solutions; he brings together the theoretical views deriving from his engagement with anthropology, sociology and psychology with the practical implications and results of his theory on general economy. His analysis of the *homogeneous* and the *heterogeneous* parts of society is invaluable for our understanding of the notion of expenditure, and hence of the transgression associated with it, as these important notions introduce an opposition which echoes that between expenditure and utility or the general and the specific.

Homogeneity for Bataille is the segment of society which is accessible to understanding and to scientific study. The homogeneous society is maintained by fixed rules which ensure its productive (useful) activity, through the common denominator of money which reduces human existence to the value of its production. All violence is excluded from homogeneity, as it is a threat from which it has to be protected, either by adaptation or by strict authority, both functions of the State. The State thus ensures the neutralisation of the heterogeneous forces that threaten the homogeneity of the

productive system.

Heterogeneity on the other hand, consists of elements that cannot be assimilated, and cannot even be examined by science due to their ungraspable nature which resembles that of the unconscious. The heterogeneous *thing* is charged with an 'unknown and dangerous force', which separates it from the homogeneous world, and provides it with a sacred value, together with a more or less intense affective reaction.[21] The heterogeneous world includes everything that is excluded from the homogeneous, namely the results of unproductive expenditure, and its reality is that 'of a force or shock. It presents itself as a charge, a value, passing from one object to another in a more or less abstract fashion […]'.[22]

Bataille's analysis, and especially his account of heterogeneity is based on several psychoanalytic ideas, making use of the concept of the unconscious as well as the affective behaviour of the crowd. However, according to Richman, although Bataille's essay is in part indebted to Freud's theories, his main influence is Durkheim's analysis of the sacred, from whom he 'derived the notion of collective effervescence as the possibility for a transformative experience'.[23] Richman goes on to say that both Le Bon and Freud exhibited a tendency to extrapolate from the individual to the group, thus never reaching a genuinely collective psychology, while Durkheim 'insisted upon the *sui generis* qualities of social/collective life …',[24] providing Bataille with a basis from which to develop his ideas presented in the essay. Also, the nature of the heterogeneous object as 'wholly other', is taken from Rudolf Otto, which Bataille, as Patrick ffrench suggests, 'removes from the context of the psychological justification

[21] Bataille Georges, 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', in *Visions of Excess,* p. 142
[22] *Ibid*., p. 143
[23] Michele Richman, 'Fascism Reviewed: Georges Bataille in *La Critique Sociale*', in *South Central Review, Vol, 14 No 3/4 Fascism and Culture: Continuing the Debate,* The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 22
[24] *Ibid*., p. 24

of religion in which it originates and reserves the logic'.[25] In this way, the feeling of awe and dependency which for Otto arises because of a religious confrontation with the sacred of which it is the proof of existence, for Bataille these feelings are the basis of the sacred: 'the sacred object is a *species* of the heterogeneous object'.[26]

Both homogeneity and heterogeneity are parts of society, the former excluding the latter which tends to form a split-off structure of its own. Its characteristic of being something completely other in terms of its contrast to the ordinary homogeneous part, is followed by its dual nature of being both pure and impure, corresponding to its being able to include both the higher and the lower strata of society: in Bataille's analysis the fascist leader possesses a kind of force which is completely other, but which is analogous to the force of repulsion that the impoverished classes also evoke.

We see here how Bataille, through an analysis of a particularly pressing political question develops his theory of transgression while maintaining the universal quality of his argument. He understands that fascism, due to the purely heterogeneous existence of its leaders casts an immense attraction which is, like everything heterogeneous, outside the realm of the ordinary, the realm of homogeneous useful productivity. This means that the individuals, the workers, are the ones hypnotised by the heterogeneous power of the leaders. Bataille's account is controversial due to this psychological aspect, which could be said to consist of a peculiar approach towards fascism. However, what he is claiming is that understanding how society in its 'inner' part works will result in an understanding of the power exerted by fascism and in an appropriate way to respond to it. As long as unproductive expenditure is denied to individuals, they will be forced to remain within the boundaries of production and reproduction, through the requirements of work and social norms, without being able to

[25] Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille, Sacrifice, Exposure, Community,* Legenda, Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2007, p. 33
[26] *Ibid*.

obtain the consciousness of their need for excess; 'possibilities for extreme expenditure are so elusive (when they are not condemned outright) that modernity deprives individuals of the capacity to even intuit this fundamental "need"'.[27] Transgression again seems to emerge here as part of a historical argument, where it becomes a problem of degradation in the present, due to its universality being neglected. However, he particular and the universal are presented as reconcilable if the possibilities of this fundamental need are taken into account.

Towards the end of the essay, Bataille states that 'from the outset, the mere consideration of affective social formations reveals the immense resources, the inexhaustible wealth of the forms particular to affective life'. And further on, 'an organized understanding of the movements in society, of attraction and repulsion, starkly presents itself as a weapon […]'.[28] From the study of the structure of fascism, Bataille concludes that from the excluded part of homogeneous society emanates an immense power that not only cannot be explained in scientific, rational terms, but that this irrationality is inherent in its existence. This argument is relevant to the degradation of transgression in modernity, which is linked to the fact that its universality is neglected or bypassed. This tension between the historical and the universal arises in Bataille's argument of this present degradation, and is indicative of his tendency to reconcile these two poles, via a thinking that engages with both.

Bataille pursues heterogeneity further: '[T]he *heterogeneous* world includes everything resulting from *unproductive* expenditure (sacred things form part of this whole). This consists of everything rejected from *homogeneous* society as waste or as superior transcendent value'.[29] Heterogeneity therefore, is not subordinate to utility, it finds in its own existence its reason for being and this 'complete otherness' is what

[27] *Ibid*., p. 25
[28] Bataille, *The Psychological Structure,* p. 159
[29] *Ibid*., p.142

exerts an immense attraction. Unproductive expenditure, in its contrast to utility, is the source of its power. Moreover, '*violence, excess, delirium, madness,* characterize heterogeneous elements to varying degrees: active, as persons or mobs, they result from breaking the laws of social *homogeneity*'.[30] Heterogeneity is the breaking of the law itself, in the sense that only the ultimate law contains within it the power to negate itself. All of its characteristics result in its exclusion from the society of rules, precisely because they are their very transgression. Since heterogeneous elements cannot by definition be assimilated, they must be rejected. This is the case because their breaking of the law which forms their very nature does not and cannot result in the alteration of the homogeneous society from within, but rather in the formation of something 'other'. In other words, heterogeneity as the embodiment of transgression has no place inside the order of homogeneous utility: it must be excluded, but this exclusion does not alter its existence. It merely provides it with an autonomous form outside the homogeneous, but still inside the structure of society.

It is precisely this form, which gathers together everything that is contrary to utility, that for Bataille creates affective reactions fluctuating between attraction and repulsion. What needs to be understood, Bataille insists, is that these elements which cannot be assimilated and whose reality is completely outside the concrete world of utility, are nevertheless existent; not only that, but they exert a force all the more powerful since they cannot be grasped. What lies at the basis of this observation is the fundamental contradiction of the sacred and the profane. Inside the profane world of reason there is no place for the violence of the heterogeneous. The only way that the homogeneous and the heterogeneous can coexist is through the distance that separates them as two distinct domains; and since both their existence is unavoidable, they must occupy two clearly separated spheres of human existence. Heterogeneity is itself part of

[30] *Ibid*. Italics in the original

transgression, of unproductive expenditure, violently contrasted to work, utility and prohibition.

In order to obtain a more complete sense of the notion of expenditure through Bataille's work, we need now to move to his later elaboration of his 'economic theory' in *The Accursed Share*, a book published in 1947, but on which Bataille had been working since at least 1939 (with an earlier, untranslated version entitled 'The Limits of the Useful'). In this book, Bataille attempts to bring together in a general and conclusive way the issues that had preoccupied him in his previous writings. The lucidity and clarity of his way of writing provide an analysis of a number of ideas expressed previously in the form of essays, using examples that are not only based on theoretical observations on 'primitive' societies but also on situations existent at the time, with the most striking example the analysis of the Marshall Plan and the post-war world. The subject of expenditure and its connection to the archaic gift, as well as the concept of heterogeneity discussed in 'The Notion of Expenditure' and in 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' are examined under the scope of the new term *general economy,* together with sacrifice, the potlatch and the bourgeois world. In what follows, I will consider expenditure in its general as well as more specific forms (for example in sacrifice), in relation to transgression, in order to specify their connection and interaction.

Bataille's thesis begins with an argument he describes as 'a basic fact', which consists of the supremacy of the sun and the superabundance of solar energy, offered to nature's creatures (including man) without return. Man's situation as a living organism becomes problematic at the moment when, after he has used all the energy for his necessary nourishment, he is left with the excess energy which must be spent at all costs:

> The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.[31]

The fact stated above appears indeed to be simple: the living organism can only grow up to a certain point. Once growth has reached its limits, two possibilities appear: either extension or the squandering of luxury. Extension is checked, however, by the limits of space, which put a stop to unlimited growth. If organisms are to keep growing, they must occupy a larger space, insofar as the limits of the biosphere will let them. Here, the introduction of a scientific term such as 'biosphere' is indicative also of the fact that Bataille is concerned about the scientific rigour of his work, as he wants his theory to be founded on a firm ground from which the readers can attain theoretically accurate information. Luxurious squandering, the other effect of the pressure applied by the limitations of growth, is most remarkably expressed in death, together with eating and sexual reproduction. Energy is used up for preservation and growth, until the surplus is no longer necessary for that purpose. Eventually, extension is no longer possible as the outlet of overgrowth and is overruled by the luxurious squandering which makes way for rebirth, for new organisms in need of growth.

The generality of this thesis lies in the fact that this current of nature stemming from the constant giving from the sun is inescapable; not only are plants and animals directly dependent on solar energy for nourishment and protection and are subjected to it, but man also inhabits the globe and consumes the solar superabundant energy in a

[31] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volume 1,* Zone Books, 2007, p. 21

direct as well as indirect manner. Allan Stoekl, following Bataille's thought, states:

> the magnificent expenditure of energy, characterized by the violence and brilliance of the sun, leads to the conclusion that energy is limitless and that the chief problem lies not in its hoarding and in the warding off of the inevitable decline, but in the glorious burn-off of the sun's surplus. In effect, the problem becomes how best to expend rather than how best to envision the consequences of shortage.[32]

Loss, wastage, or expenditure is unavoidable, but not easily grasped by consciousness, as Bataille develops. Man, avoiding the truth of the squandering of surplus energy, has in his view devised solutions that belong to the domain of restricted, particular economy. By not accepting in lucid consciousness the general movement of nature of which he is necessarily a part, he is in a way trapped inside utility and its requirements for production. General economy is governed by excess and by the 'accursed share' that always remains outside utility where man has complete control. The deficit of resources is a problem posed by the particular, or 'restricted' economic point of view, where individualised anguish exists as 'radically opposed to the *general* point of view based on the exuberance of living matter as a whole'.[33] The question thus, becomes for Bataille one of consciousness and it is directly connected to the way humanity understands itself.

While energy is limitless, it is also the transgression of limits itself. Growth being its initial effect, once accomplished, the only road left is that of excess. Surplus energy signifies the limit which is bound to be overcome. Man is tied up to this cycle of consumption – growth – squandering as is everything that inhabits the biosphere. The

[32] Allan Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak, Energy, Religion and Postsustainability,* University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 33
[33] Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* p. 39

difference, in Bataille's argument, is that man, contrary to animals, can attain the self-consciousness able to lift the curse which 'obviously weighs on human life insofar as it does not have the strength to control a vertiginous moment'.[34] If excess is what signifies the limit, self-consciousness, or specifically a human consciousness of expenditure lies at the moment of its transgression. For human beings to conceive their humanity, they need to discover its limit; and this discovery is only possible through its overcoming, with a transgression that does not erase the limit but, as Foucault puts it in an important essay published in *Critique* in 1963, titled 'Preface to Transgression', it 'carries the limit right to the limit of its being […] forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes (perhaps, to be more exact, to recognize itself for the first time) […]'.[35] The limit discloses that which is disclosable, which would not be perceivable if it remained within the boundaries that signify its limitations. Transgression thus becomes a question of consciousness in so far as it is a realisation of the limited and excessive nature of what is human.

Thus, man understands himself in his wholeness at the moment when he overcomes the limits that coincide with the principles of utility. The surplus of energy is by definition not usable, and this is why it must be destroyed in an extravagant way. This means that the limits of utility must be overcome, with the lucid consciousness of a being that does so deliberately. Man is for the most part of his life situated within the rules prescribed by work, where even spending is conducted according to these particular rules. The non-usability of surplus energy is the conscious spending of the excess energy without concern for the future, without any connection to a useful end. Stoekl highlights the difference between that which *can* be used and that which is *un*-usable. The energy coinciding with transgression is fundamentally unusable, it is the

[34] *Ibid*., p. 40
[35] Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in *Bataille: A Critical Reader,* Blackwell, 1998, p.28

one that 'by definition does not do work, that is insubordinate, that plays *now* rather than contributing to some effort that may mean something at some later date […]'.[36] Energy as transgression transfers man from his rational sphere of work to that of irrationality and excess, which is also and most importantly his own too. But to own it, in other words to experience the moment of what Bataille calls *sovereignty*, he must, as suggested at the end of the introduction to *The Accursed Share*, become conscious of the explosive character of the world he inhabits and of his activity within it.

The problem therefore, lies not in the fact that nature's current, and unavoidably man's course, is that of loss and luxurious squandering; that is an established fact for Bataille. The issue is rather the way in which man reacts to this fact, which is ultimately an issue of perceiving himself as part of this current, in accordance with the principles of general rather that restricted economy. Man, in perceiving himself, must therefore develop his self-consciousness; this could, Bataille proposes, expand in two directions: on the one hand, man needs to change the way he sees and knows himself, and on the other, man needs to change the way he *is* in himself, with an understanding which I would like to see as *from the inside*. It becomes clear here, and it will be crucial for the development of my thesis, that Bataille's position favours experience over knowledge, that is, instead of knowing oneself differently and from the outside, one should search for one's truth, and understand one's own nature through experience. In this sense I see Bataille's argument, as well as his general views on the human condition as *hermeneutic* rather than epistemological, offering an existential rather than a solely epistemological presentation of 'what it is to be human'.

Nevertheless, in a slightly contradictory fashion, Bataille pursues in the second part of the *Accursed Share,* a study of the objective, historical data in relation to general economy, beginning with the sacrifices and wars of the Aztecs. Sacrifice as a specific

[36] Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak,* p. XVI

form of expenditure contains all of its characteristics in a way that makes manifest its connection to transgression; therefore, its analysis is necessary for our account of transgression and its relation to expenditure. Sacrifice is one way in which surplus energy, transgressive energy that cannot by definition be used, is spent. The Aztecs seemed to understand the significance of expenditure and the relation of consumption with the blinding force of the sun. As the vast amounts of solar energy are given without return, so did they violently destroy without return and without any connection to utility the surplus of the victim which escaped the real order in the fever of the festival. In fact, the victim is the only one who can exit the world of order, in contrast to the participants who can only momentarily enter the world of intimacy, which is 'antithetical to the *real* world as immoderation is to moderation, madness to reason, drunkenness to lucidity'.[37] The term 'intimacy' signifies the inextricable connection of human beings with nature, when the boundaries that exist between them are destroyed, implying thus its power and that ultimately, transgression is unavoidable. Transgressive consumption is a moment of 'freedom' from the objects and their knowledge, as well as from the constant concern with the future; but intimacy is only found in the moment, or not found at all, in the sense that the complete escape of the real presupposes death, and excludes a lived experience.

Sacrifice for the Aztecs 'restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane'.[38] Inside the world of utility the subject is turned into an object, a thing, where intimacy is replaced by labour. As long as man works, he is himself what he produces; he is himself a thing. To escape this situation and to recover his lost intimacy, he participates in the sacrifice where the victim, destroyed as a thing, reveals the connection with the universe, while regaining its subjectivity in dying.

[37] Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* p. 55
[38] *Ibid.*

Sacrifice is consumption and the victim is consumed without profit, this useless consumption being its only purpose for its removal from the order of utility. Extracted from the world of work, the victim is now surplus, whose only reason for being is its violent, unproductive destruction which opens the way towards communication and towards the entering into the sacred of the participants: 'consumption is the way is which *separate* beings communicate'.[39] Bataille's 'communication' needs some further clarification, for what it signifies is different from the traditional, discursive perception of this term.

Sacrifice opens up communication between beings who are separate, in other words, beings who are subordinate to work that detaches them from the continuity of the universe. Discourse, belonging to the world of reason and utility is unavoidably also separated from intimacy, unable to reach communication outside the limits of reason. Michèle Richman suggests that '[t]he general economy of *dépense* continues to be a forceful notion because it encompasses not only extremes, but illuminates non-discursive instants of communication as well'.[40] Sacrifice is such an instant, and it is so literally, as it creates the conditions for communicating outside language and reason, and does so only for a moment, that is, the moment of transgression. Instead of occurring inside discourse, communication occurs rather through experience. Separate beings rediscover intimacy, and for that moment they are not separate but in accordance to the continuity of the universe. 'Laughter, eroticism, ecstasy, heroism, and sacrifice: all govern the law of communication among individuals, whom the degradation of collective life would condemn to isolated agony'.[41] Escape from isolation is only possible through non-discursive communication, in other words, at the moment of transgression which eliminates the rules of discourse. In non-productive expenditure, in

[39] *Ibid*., p 58
[40] Richman, *Beyond the Gift,* p. 153
[41] *Ibid*., p. 38

the profitless consumption of the sacrifice, the limit of the man of utility is transgressed together with the means for this limited communication. Transgression opens up the sacred where intense violence is itself communication, but between beings who are no longer subordinate to the principles of utility and therefore to language. In this sense, consumption is indeed the way separate beings communicate, and it is moreover the only one, since any other (discursive) way is by definition subordinate to utility and in accordance with their separateness. If consumption is communication, then the transgressive energy that allows for it to take place is its means. Transgression lies at the basis of this communication outside of reason, as it signifies the point where reason breaks down. Consumption takes on the meaning it has in sacrifice only if this ritual is simultaneously an overcoming of limits.

Taking a step back to look at the operation of Bataille's thought here, it is not easy to separate the meaning of transgression from that of sacrifice, communication or excess, as all of these terms in Bataille's writing often refer to the same notion and produce one and the same result: the opening up to the sacred. Also, their effect is described in terms of time as 'momentary', and this moment is the same for each one: the moment of transgression *is* the moment of sacrifice, *is* the moment of communication and excess. This simultaneity in Bataille's work is evident not only with respect to transgression, but throughout the body of his work, as his concepts flow from one to the other in a way that does not allow for a firm ground on which they can each be situated. Progression is lacking in his work, but this is not due to some inconsistency, but rather, I argue, to the nature of the concepts he engages with. As transgression and sacrifice are not connected with each other in terms of cause and effect, but rather flow into each other rendering their arrangement extremely difficult, so does Bataille's logic follow this intermingling. In other words, there is no clear progression in his logic, as there is also none in the concepts of which he writes. This makes his effort for a

schematic presentation of his ideas extremely difficult, as his concepts bleed into one another in the very development of his thought and his writing.

The question of whether transgression can be separated from this web of notions and evaluated differently is a crucial one, and I would like to approach it with respect to its temporality as well as its relation to 'dramatisation', to a staged scene. If we were to argue for transgression as dundamental, we would have to seek its particularity in its nature as 'fissure', as the 'event' that signifies a passage from something to something else, from the sphere of utility to that of violence and excess. Sacrifice is to some extent the dramatisation of this transformation, it is a way to make it perceivable and to actively participate in it. Of course, it is real life that is sacrificed, it is the object as object that while dying permanently enters intimacy, in other words, it is the bloody reality of sacrifice that bestows its meaning. The transformation is in need of the 'external violence [that] reveals the internal violence of the creature, seen as loss of blood and ejaculations'.[42] However, although sacrifice *is* the blood and ejaculations, it is so in a way that resembles a theatrical act, which could contain the threat of limiting itself to the structure of a metaphor rather than a concrete autonomous event. The difference between the reality of the event and the abstract nature of metaphor is fluid and the two must be clearly distinguished.

Sacrifice as 'dramatisation', presents us with a problem that the contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy is aware of and deals with in his essay 'The Unsacrificeable', one of the most consequent readings of this aspect of Bataille's thought. In Nancy's account, the modern, Western sacrifice is the mimesis and repetition of the 'old' sacrifice, which is now manipulated, to reveal an entirely new, transfigured meaning. Sacrifice is spiritualised with a 'double operation': 'it disavows itself beneath the figure of an "old" sacrifice, which it pretends to know and which in

[42] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism,* Marion Boyars, 2006, p. 91

reality it fabricates for its own purposes. And it approves of itself in the form of an infinite process of negativity, which it covers with the "sacred" name of "sacrifice"'.[43] As modern societies cannot know or understand what the old sacrifice signified for the participants of this past time, they are left with a kind of manipulation which results in the ambiguity of the simultaneous existence of both the 'dialectical negativity *and* the bloody heart of sacrifice'.[44] Sacrifice then, presents us with an impasse, which consists of the paradox that if the subject is not fully destroyed, then the ambiguity remains, and if it is destroyed, the ambiguity vanishes but the subject is not there to experience its result. For Nancy, this leaves us faced with the necessity of choosing between the simulacrum (the representation of the 'old' sacrifice) and nothingness (self-sacrifice).[45] Art, in Nancy's argument, following that of Bataille, can supplement this impasse, as it reveals the horror of sacrifice without the necessity of the horror of blood spilled, while it is still accompanied by the emotion that it produces. The subject then experiences the sovereign moment through art, without access to real sacrifice, but still in accordance to sacrificial thought which demands to find the place where sacrifice comes from; but if, as Nancy elaborates, for Bataille sovereignty is NOTHING, as the latter famously declares in *The Accursed Share Vol, II & III,* this place is equally nothing and therefore, there isn't anything that can be sacrificed for it.

This is the point that Nancy makes: sacrifice is always linked to a fascination towards something or someone outside of finitude, of the subject's 'being-thrown' into the world. But there is no outside: 'the event of existence, the "there-is", means that there is *nothing* else', and therefore, 'existence in this sense, in its proper sense, is unsacrificeable'.[46] Nancy exposes the fluidity that exists between the scene of the (real)

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[43] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Unsacrificeable'*, Yale French Studies*, No 79, *Literature and the Ethical Question*, 1991, p. 27
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] *Ibid*., pp. 28-29
[46] *Ibid*., p. 37

sacrifice and its spiritualisation that transforms it to an abstract dialectic. Nancy's argument has the merit of pointing to the ambivalence of sacrifice in Bataille's thought, and as such it is both a dramatised event and a metaphorical structure.

Bataille's sacrifice seems to move from a presentation of sacrifice that is 'real' to another that is abstract, spiritualised, dialectical. In *Eroticism,* discussing the link between religion and literature, he writes: 'A sacrifice is a novel, a story, illustrated in a bloody fashion. Or rather a rudimentary form of a stage drama reduced to the final episode where the human or animal victim acts it out alone until his death'.[47] Here, we find the element of dramatisation that also demands that the blood spilled will be real; it may be theatrical, in the sense that the victim, the priest, the audience, all assume their roles, but the sacrificial act takes place in real time and space that ensure its finite character. It could even be that the theatrical scene of sacrifice is ultimately the only form it can take. The reality of the scene does not depend on its truth or falsity, but on its actual taking place, as 'it is not a crime but rather the enactment of one; it is a game'.[48] Stripping sacrifice of this 'fictional' element would remove its function as enactment and game, providing it with a different quality, perhaps something closer to a metaphor, or a process that is not in need of a tangible reality in order to fulfil its purpose. This is a different kind of sacrifice whose character is not anymore that of enactment but that of an operation, a structure that has a distinct end.

We could argue that the purpose of sacrifice is transgression, and therefore the structure operates with the purpose of experiencing transgression, reaching it as a desired end. The difference lies in the fact that in the first, 'theatrical' sacrifice the reality, the finitude of tangible objects serves as the enactment of a scene and therefore as the contextualisation of transgression in space and time, while in the second 'non-

[47] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 87
[48] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volumes II & III,* Zone Books, 2007, p.106

theatrical' sacrifice, the finitude of objects is manipulated in an effort to create a structure that would lead to transgression. While in the first case sacrifice allows transgression to be revealed by providing it with a concrete context in space, in the second, the finite space serves as a means to force its appearance; this sacrifice is closer to what Nancy calls the *unsacrificeable,* in other words, it is the sacrifice of the subject that cannot be sacrificed to anyone or anything, because nothing precedes it or stands outside its own existence.

Transgression, on the other hand, has nothing real and tangible about it. It occupies the domain of time rather than space, but time which is situated outside the relevance of past and future. The temporality of transgression concerns only the present, and therefore is the *absence* of time. Its appearance is also its disappearance, for no relative connection can be made with a future in order to situate it within a beginning and an end. To situate the time of transgression would mean to consign a duration to it, a beginning in the present, and an end, necessarily in the future; but its position in the future automatically gives rise to the need to situate its beginning not in the present but in a time which now, necessarily belongs to the past. Having a before and an after eliminates the *right now*, which is the peculiar position of transgression in time: a 'now' that is time, but which at the same time escapes time; without future it resolves into nothingness. The moment of transgression is purely a moment, the specific moment of transgression, unique in its position *only* in the present.

Sacrifice is what renders possible the participation in the nothingness that transgression opens up. Nothingness is understood as the collapse of all meaning and knowledge, in other words as the annihilation of reason. If transgression is outside of time, neither in the past nor in the future, it is outside of space also, space as the set of entities which acquire their meaning only via human knowledge. It is posited neither in reason, nor in un-reason, always separated from both. Just as the chronological present

is disconnected from its logical before and after and is therefore something completely different, it is also disconnected from the sphere of utility as well as from the sphere of unproductive expenditure. It can be situated between the two for it is the passage from one to the other, but this between does not allow for a connection either to the first or the second. Transgression as a bridge from one domain to another attains a character that is distinctly separate, meaning that it cannot be safely situated in either domain. Being in the middle, the bridge leads from one to the other without merging with either one of the domains. We could say that it is a domain on its own: the domain of transgression. Sacrifice, understood as a concrete scene, albeit its theatrical character, is what provides transgression with a duration, in other words, a place in the temporal reality in which it would otherwise not be able to enter. The dramatisation of sacrifice consists of the creation of a sphere that allows for the intangible and atemporal transgression to acquire both a tangible reality and a temporality that can fit in the finite world where it takes place.

The primacy of transgression then, can be sought in its independence in time and in space which does not allow for its positioning as a result of something else. In tracing the fundamentality of transgression over the moment of sacrifice, we could argue that sacrifice is possible only through transgression, it is the dramatisation of the passage to the sacred. Sacrifice follows after the overcoming of the limit, which always has a distinct, though elusive, place in the middle of profanity and sacredness. Transgression marks the difference of the two domains with the breaking of limits, which means that in and with the destruction of the limit, it simultaneously creates another limit: that between the two worlds. In overcoming reason, transgression reveals its boundaries, and therefore allows for a clear movement from one to the other.

According to the argument I have broached above, the distinction between the ‘two worlds’, the profound and the sacred, must be made clear. Throughout his work

Bataille uses a number of terms in order to illustrate this distinction, such as *continuity, immanence* or *intimacy.* In the posthumous book *Theory of Religion,* first published in 1973, in the first chapter entitled 'Animality', Bataille discusses the way in which man perceives animals and the significance of this perception. For human beings, animals are not of the same quality as things, objects. In animality man sees something that he himself has lost and which is for him now completely foreign and closed off: 'the animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me'.[49] This depth, he continues, as that which deserves this name, is '*that which is unfathomable to me.* But this too is poetry…'.[50] Human beings can speak of and understand animals only after they filter their existence through consciousness and through the rationality that is determined by the usefulness of work; in other words, only after they objectify them, turn them into things that fulfil a useful purpose in their rational world. But since animals are not equal to things, the only way to truly describe their nature is through poetry, or 'the slip toward the unknowable'.[51]

We can pursue this logic further: what animals 'possess' and what humans have lost is, as we saw previously, *intimacy*, that is, the complete agreement with nature and the world where there is no duration, no past or future, but only uninterrupted continuity. Bataille describes this as being on a level with the world as 'water in water'.[52] In this powerful image we can detect several elements: the quality of liquidity in water implies its constant flowing, and also the impossibility of its separation into two or more substances. Water, at least without the aid of science, is characterised by its wholeness and unity. Water in water is indistinct, unrecognisable, only adding to its sameness. Moreover, its movement suggests a harmony, in the sense that flowing water moves toward the same direction, with the same pace, and nothing in it is separated or

[49] Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Zone Books, 1989, p. 22
[50] *Ibid*. Italics in the original
[51] *Ibid*., p. 21
[52] *Ibid*., p. 25

takes a different course. Finally, this image brings to mind elements not only of its substance as sameness, but also of its positioning in time: unavoidably, flowing water comes to symbolise something eternal, a never ending flow; and eternity, if it is a constant flow of time of a circular character with no beginning or end, it is nothing but the absence of time.

Intimacy then, is situated in the world as an eternal continuity of sameness; but this 'putting in place' is only possible through human eyes. Words like 'eternal' and 'continuity' only take on a meaning in a world where temporality also has a meaning. The world of animals is indifferent to the distinctions of time and in this sense it *is* the world, as a whole. Man is cut off from it because of his temporal consciousness; but the very existence of animals, of beings so similar to himself and yet so vastly different, is a constant reminder of the yearning for this lost intimacy. The question is how to satisfy this desire, how to be part of something that is outside of humanity in the most striking way. If man were to experience being in a continuous state, in other words, if he were to take part in intimacy, he would necessarily not be man at all. His sense of duration, and his complete absorption in the world of utility is what defines his human nature and separation from animals. He would have to exit the world of things which he understands and has control of, to enter a 'place' that is by definition unknowable. Thus, his experience of intimacy as a human being is inconceivable. In order therefore for man to get a glimpse of intimacy, he must find himself outside of time, in a moment where the future of utility is vanished and the only thing that remains is useless expenditure. This is the function of sacrifice:

> What is important is to pass from a lasting order, in which all consumption of resources is subordinated to the need for duration, to the violence of an unconditional consumption; what is important is to leave a world of real things whose reality derives from a long term operation and never resides in

> the moment […]. Sacrifice is the antithesis of production, which is accomplished with a view to the future; it is the consumption that is concerned only with the moment.[53]

Bataille refers here to the importance of sacrifice as a 'moment': the moment of sacrifice, of transgression. However, I will suggest that since the experience of sacrifice brings forth the witnessing of intimacy, which is precisely the breakdown of temporality, this moment is not a moment in time, but it is rather, time's fissure. The 'present' of sacrifice is completely withdrawn from its relation to the continuum of time and therefore in its emergence it loses its meaning as a point in time. Since man in this experience loses his connection to utility and to his useful concern with the future, the concept of time also loses its signification, and the experience acquires the obscure quality of a break down in the temporal order. As the real order collapses, duration also collapses. Man can be part of intimacy, as 'water in water', only if he can escape time in the 'moment of fissure'.

Intimacy is not a foreign world which man tries to reach, situated outside of that of his own. It is the world he inhabits, only he cannot have access to it the way animals do. The world is intimate, indifferent, continuous, and only man is not part of it. The moment of transgression signifies the access to this intimacy; it is in a sense the transformation of the world of work that has meaning and is defined by utility, into the world that is defined by their absence. When time breaks down and reality loses its signification, the world of our knowledge ceases to be what it is through the eyes of rationality, and becomes something completely different; without knowledge it becomes sovereign, and sovereignty, as Bataille exclaims is NOTHING.[54] The absence of knowledge is what signifies the sovereign moment and it is from the complete

[53] *Ibid*., p.49
[54] Bataille, *The Accursed Share II & III*, p. 256

dissociation with everything that has meaning for humanity that it is attained.

The Sacred

In order to explore Bataille's thinking about sacrifice further, and more fully inform the ensuing chapters, I will need now to move back from the predominantly economic arguments developed in *The Accursed Share* and the earlier essays, and focus on an intervening moment in the chronology of Bataille's work, that is, the attention given to the notion of the sacred around the moment of the 'College of Sociology'. The sacred is a theme that Bataille explores consistently throughout his work, often fluctuating between different meanings as well as uses. As Patrick ffrench points out, the theory of the sacred emerges from the political scene of the early 1930s, having then a primarily political tone. From this account of the sacred as a theory of political violence, Bataille moves on to the definition of a sacred that turns away from politics for the sake of a more 'ahistorical' notion, one that is more concerned with new forms of communication between men.

The context around which this 'new' theory of the sacred emerges is within and between two institutions, two communities, one being open to anyone with a relative interest, the 'College of Sociology', and the other the closed, secret group of *Acéphale*. Bataille, as he often does, follows theory with his actions in a way that one completes the other. The two groups in this case constitute the 'real life' representation of theory: the theory of the sacred is expressed on paper but also practiced in real life, within the activities of *Acéphale*; this at least was the intention.

The question that I wish to address at this instance is the nature of the sacred as communication, a question which Bataille and the community of *Acéphale* seemed to have been trying to answer for themselves. 'Community' here is of crucial importance since it constitutes the form that allows for the sacred to appear. Within the context of

'sacred sociology', the sacred is communication between members of a community, members of a group, as opposed to communication between two beings tied with the bond of love. The sacred emerges in both circumstances, but communication within the group, 'communal' communication, is different than that occurring between the lovers, which could be called 'dual' communication. This opposition between the communal and the dual can shed light on the nature of the sacred within the context of sacred sociology, where, I will argue, the sacred as communication emerges within the bonds of a community.

In the essay titled 'The Sacred', first published in the journal *Cahiers d'art* in 1939, Bataille outlines the nature of the sacred as 'perhaps the most ungraspable thing that has been produced between men: the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled'.[55] He goes on to say that, what is most important is that the sacred is now accessible, therefore it must be reached as the only acceptable goal of man. Since 'God is dead', there are no obstacles and no excuses for man to settle for anything less.

This privileged 'fleeting' moment is recognised as the one thing that man strives to reach. He is then searching for something that has no substance, that cannot in any way be grasped but is always bound to disappear the moment it appears. Ungraspable though, does not mean unattainable. The 'result' of the sacred is a moment of communication which can and should be attained, as it is the ultimate goal of man. This is what the community is able to offer, or in a sense, to 'make appear'. Sacrifice, literally the making sacred, is the means of the community for sharing a privileged moment, for making the sacred appear; and for this appearance the scene of sacrifice is needed, whether in the concrete ritual taking place between the members of a 'primitive' society, or in the form of myth. In the society of *Acéphale*, the acephalous

[55] Georges Bataille, 'The Sacred', in *Visions of Excess,* p. 242

man is the representation of the ritual, with the members identifying with the headless group. This seems to be in accordance with the logic of sacrifice as in need of a dramatisation elaborated above but here, this dramatisation is instigated as a contemporary figure or 'myth' which, moreover, provides an alternative to fascism.

The figure of the acephalous man gives rise to the issue of mediation, so important for Bataille, as he endeavours to propose a communication which is non-verbal and non-mediated. The scene of sacrifice is a medium, it is a spectacle that offers a representation of the sacred, and therefore forces its unmediated character to disappear. If communication occurs via a scene, an image, it is not very far from that which occurs via linguistic means. Thus, we are moving towards a notion of transgressive dramatisation through figure, through art, and through literature.

Here Bataille's argument becomes one concerning the necessity and purpose of art as a means of attaining and realising transgression. The artist is now responsible for expressing the sacred: '*alone,* he suddenly has at his disposal all possible human convulsions, and he cannot flee from this heritage of divine power – which belongs to him'.[56] Bataille's thought on this matter provides the basis for a theory of aesthetic production and reception where art gives rise to a complex dual relationship: one that exists between the artist and his artwork, and another between the artwork and the person perceiving it. In the first case, the artist creates for himself the sacred, trying to fulfil his destiny, using his 'divine power'. In his search for the sacred he creates his version of it, he experiences the fleeting, divine moment. Writing, painting, are the artist's sacrifice, he has the means for making the sacred appear; and what he does is to offer his power to others. The artwork ceases to be his own sacrifice and takes the form of the spectacle. The artwork for the others, is then the representation of sacrifice, or, in other words, the representation of a representation. If sacrifice is a scene that allows for

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 245

the sacred to appear, then its depiction is a double representation. The figure of the acephalous man created by André Masson, for example, is his own creation, as he is trying to depict the sacred instant. Subsequently it becomes for the group of *Acéphale* the representation of what it celebrates, the image that allows for the group to unite and communicate.

According to this argument, Bataille, as author, is also the artist faced with this double relation. On the one hand, he is the creator of the artwork, the novel, and this is the fulfilment of his destiny. In the preface for *Blue of Noon* he writes:

> A story that reveals the possibilities of life is not necessarily an appeal; but it does appeal to a moment of fury without which its author would remain blind to these possibilities which are those of *excess.* Of this I am sure: only an intolerable, impossible ordeal can give an author the means of achieving that wide-ranging vision that readers weary of the narrow limitations imposed by convention are waiting for.[57]

He then continues to elaborate this thought with a (rhetorical) question: 'how can we linger over books to which their authors have manifestly not been *driven?*'.[58] Bataille is driven towards his destiny and acknowledges as his driving force 'the moment of fury'. At this moment, he is able to realise his outmost possibilities, those of excess, in accordance with 'the death of God' and the limitlessness that this implies. This will prove important for my later elaboration of the significance of fiction in Bataille's thought, and the importance of fiction in relation to transgression; the author of *Blue of Noon,* in its very creation is his own sacrifice; at the moment of fury, the act of writing ceases to be a mere act of representation (in the sense that similarly, a painting is a representation of reality) as it becomes the very transgression of the limits of

[57] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 153
[58] *Ibid.*

representation. Writing, when the author is driven to it, manages to escape its character as a task, as a purely linguistic activity and becomes the transgression of these limits. The written, the words, produce communication but not anymore in a linguistic universe, but in one that is now non-verbal.

In the relation of the writer with his novel, the words are sacrificed at the moment of fury in something that can be named a 'personal' communication. The writer as the subject, alone, experiences the transgression of his creation, as part of the making sacred. But what he creates is something verbal, similar to the painting being something visual, an image. The novel is a collection of pages filled with words, as the painting is the combination of colours and lines. The decisive moment is that of interaction: the reading of the novel, the viewing of the painting. But contrary to the relation of the artist to the artwork which is explicitly personal, the reader or the admirer of the painting is to the artwork an outsider. The reader encounters someone else's work; to her, the novel is not attached to the driving force that led to its creation. The reader is the impersonal, anonymous reader, who did not experience the moment of fury, and yet, she too is able to experience the excess that follows the novel's creation.

How does this work? In answering this question I want to try to move Bataille's account of transgression and sacrifice towards questions associated with fiction, with reading and writing. In order for the reader to experience and take part in something that escapes the rules of language, she too must step outside these rules. The reader is the impersonal reader, one that is not defined by any fixed characteristics but always becoming. Her relation to the novel is always a future one, defined after its reading it. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's thoughts on 'whatever being', elaborated in his book *The Coming Community* (a work which comes 'in the wake' so to speak, of Bataille's *Acéphale*) can be of use here, in illuminating the impersonal character of the reader with respect to the novel. According to Agamben, '*whatever* is the figure of pure

singularity. *Whatever* singularity has no identity, it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation to an *idea,* that is, to the totality of its possibilities'.[59] Pure singularity is stripped from the classifications of language, and is determined by its own possibilities. It is in a sense naked, and as naked it can achieve a communication that is also naked, that is, devoid of any conformity to verbal communicative rules. *Whatever* being is one that has no fixed archetype and therefore, it is unrepresentable. Without identity it is open to existence with no other limits but its own absolute possibilities.

To take Agamben's notion a little further, without representation and without identity, '*whatever* reader' is the ideal reader for Bataille. The relation of the reader to the novel is now in the space that is beyond language, but which still produces (non-verbal) communication. *Whatever* reader, in not having an identity, can put himself in the position of the writer. Through the impersonal, the reader can achieve the personal of the author, in other words, he too can experience the moment of fury, the one that drives the author to write, precisely through his losing his own identity as a reader. In *whatever* being, the author and the reader are one and the same, as they are both their own possibilities. As Agamben elaborates, in a way which resonated very much with Bataille's terms: 'If humans could, that is, not be-thus in this or that particular biography, but be only *the* thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable'.[60]

A community of the readers, the anonymous, impersonal readers, is created every time the novel is read. Defying space and time, a community is created, without the need of any unifying characteristics other that the limitlessness of possibilities. The

[59] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community,* University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 67
[60] *Ibid*, p. 64.5

relationship between the reader and the novel, not being defined by any identity, becomes in some sense the same as that between the writer and his novel. The fusion of the personal and the impersonal is possible at the moment of fury, the moment when representation is transgressed. The group of readers becomes the community of readers, and more precisely, *whatever* readers that reject all identity and every condition of belonging. As for the author the limits of representation are transgressed at his own moment of fury, for the reader, the representation is annulled the moment she puts herself in unrepresentable space. In the community of readers then, the novel is not the representation of the writer's sacrifice, but their own sacrifice as well.

In the essay 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', which 'inaugurates' the College of Sociology, Bataille is concerned with man in his totality and the obstacles that prevent him from fulfilling his destiny, his need to be man. He also moves towards fiction here. In fourteen small chapters he describes the fragmented, 'dissociated' world which is reduced to three domains: science, art and politics, where 'the renunciation of life in exchange for a function is the condition consented to by each of them'.[61] This text, first published in the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* in 1938, is written as a response to the Russian philosopher and Hegel specialist Alexandre Kojève's accusations towards Bataille and The College, that they were acting like the sorcerer's apprentice, using their magic tricks without being aware of their meaning, and ending up believing them themselves. As ffrench points out, Bataille's essay has many similarities to Kojéve's seminars on Hegel's *Phenomelogy of Spirit*:

> Like Kojeve's account of the dialectical movement of spirit toward the realization of the end of history, 'L'Apprenti Sorcier' gives an account of the obstacles that stand in the way of man's realization of his destiny, or his totality. In the same way

[61] Georges Bataille, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', in *Visions of Excess,* p. 227

> as the Hegelian account of history ends with its apotheosis in Hegel himself, 'the Sage', Bataille's text also has the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy, oriented as it is towards the realization of destiny in the 'sorcerer's apprentice' and the 'secret society' in which we can recognize Bataille himself and Acéphale.'[62]

Bataille in this essay presents the problem (freedom and realisation of man's destiny) and offers the solution: denial of the dissociated world subordinated to particular projects and useful labor, and return to the lost 'totality of life'.[63] After presenting the Man of Science, the Man of Fiction and the Man of Action, to highlight the insufficiency of science, art and politics respectively, Bataille offers the 'Image of the Loved One' as an alternative to this isolated half-life state:

> The renunciation of dreams and the practical will of the man of action thus do not represent the only ways to touch the real world. The world of lovers is no less *true* than that of politics. It even absorbs the totality of life, which politics cannot do […]. [T]he world of lovers is constructed, like life, out of a *series of chances that give the awaited answer to an avid and powerful will to be.*[64]

In order to transform the world, 'to make it similar to dreams', man has to act. But in doing so, he must avoid simply translating fiction into the principles of the real world, namely the principles proposed by science and political doctrines. The aim is to make real that which is only capable of being real in human life. There is a paradox inherent in this proposition: what is fundamentally real in man is not real in his everyday life, which is by definition his reality. This is the meaning of the sentence: 'the truth pursued by science is true only provided that it be without meaning, and nothing has meaning

[62] ffrench, *After Bataille*, p. 19
[63] Bataille, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', p. 229
[64] *Ibid.*

unless it be fiction'.[65] Fiction reveals man's 'true' desire, but in the endeavour to turn this truth into reality, it is immediately lost, reduced to nothing more than 'the boring reflections of a fragmentary world'.[66] The truth of fiction is also its falsity.

To escape this paradox, man has recourse to love. The world of lovers is 'the third path', where dream is capable of turning into reality without conforming to the principles of science and politics. Bataille describes the loved one as an *image*, and furthermore, an illusory one. This illusion stems from the fact that the image of the loved one (the woman towards whom man is drawn as towards his destiny, in Bataille's words) does not belong to the everyday world. Mundane actions that belong to utility are incompatible with her qualities. What makes possible the shift from dream/illusion to reality is her possession, that 'throws the nude and pleasure-drowned dream figure into the narrowly real world of the bedroom'.[67]

A comparison is made here between the world of lovers and fiction, starting from the necessarily illusory character of the loved one. The lovers share a communication that exists beyond words, and that is expressed in the ecstasy of their physical union. This is what gives rise to the 'real world of a bedroom', that even absorbs the totality of life. The illusion of their first meeting, the one that is confined in the limits of the fragmented world and which forces its character as illusion, is turned over at the moment of the act of love.

These two stages are described by Bataille in terms that allude to the difference between day and night, light and darkness, where the illusion/dream is a quality of day, in opposition to reality, which appears at night. Day is the timeframe where utility reigns, where traditionally work takes place: it is 'the space that money controls'.[68] On the contrary, night and darkness is the timeframe of the turning over of illusions, or

[65] *Ibid*., p. 225
[66] *Ibid*., p. 226
[67] *Ibid*., p. 229
[68] *Ibid., p. 228*

rather of making the dream, as a dream, into reality. This is 'the guarded space where science – as much as art or practical action - has lost the possibility of giving fragmentary meaning to existence'.[69] Art, or fiction, belongs to the reality of daytime labour, and there is no 'redemption' for it. Although it is able (contrary to science) to express and respond to 'the will of man', it nevertheless remains in the falsity that provides it with that power. The first illusory meeting of the lovers, Bataille states, is not of the same order as that of theatre or books. 'For theatre and literature cannot by themselves create *a world where beings relocate each other.* The most rending visions represented by art have never created anything more than a fugitive link between the people they have touched'.[70]

Literary creation then, does not manage to create the 'real world of the bedroom' where lovers commune even in the most profound silence, but it does open up a real, or sacred state. The world of lovers is formed within their dual relationship and the reality that transforms the dream is enclosed inside their own world, and their own world only. What produces the powerful result of the totality of life, the sacred union, is also what constitutes its 'weakness', or its insufficiency: in absorbing the totality of life, the lovers are excluded from everything else, the rest of the world is left intact. The locked bedroom contains the lovers in their ecstasy and their sacred communion but leaves everything else outside.

Literature, on the other hand, proposes not a dual relationship but one that is communal and that takes place irrespectively of gender or identity. Compared to the community of lovers, the community of readers, perhaps *whatever* readers, as I elaborated previously, forms a relationship that, when certain requirements are met, is able to open up the space to the sacred, transforming the reality of everyday activities to

[69] *Ibid*.
[70] *Ibid*.

the reality of man in his totality. The requirements of literary creation that can offer a glimpse of the real are the same as those necessary for every creation: to make the world similar to dreams. The objective is to create literature that does not turn into the fragmented life of utility the moment it translates to reality.

One of my core arguments in this thesis is that Bataille's own fiction provides an example of how literary phantoms can transform reality, instead of being transformed themselves with their reduction to the level of a 'half-life'. Of course, what is most important in Bataille's novels is not the text itself but the relationship it opens up between the reader and the fictional characters, as well as between the reader and himself, the writer. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons in her essay 'Sacrifice and Violence in Bataille's Erotic Fiction' examines this sets of relations and the effect they have on each of these relations, using the technique of *mise en abîme,* a term she uses to denote Bataille's idiosyncratic use of the technique usually termed as *mise en abyme.* The text operates as the scene of sacrifice and allows for both the writer and the reader to enter continuity, or the totality of being. Boldt-Irons writes:

> The complexity of Bataille's idiosyncratic use of the technique becomes apparent when one observes that the *mise en abîme* of characters and notions sets off a second *mise en abîme* in the reader or witness … [T]he function of this *mise en abîme* in Bataille's texts is to initiate in the reader a loss that is neither fully lost nor gained, but caught, rather, in the paradox of a simultaneous and impossible loss *and* gain.[71]

With this technique, Boldt-Irons suggests that at a first moment, Bataille's image serves as the acting body that contains the potential force of poetic violence, directed at the second moment, at the limit of the received notions of the text, altering in this way the

[71] Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons, 'Sacrifice and Violence in Bataille's Erotic Fiction', in *Bataille, Writing the Sacred,* ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill, Routledge, 1995, p. 92

integrity of these notions. Following Bataille's view on sacrifice that the sacrificer as well as the onlookers are not only witnessing the victim's return to continuity, but are themselves returning to continuity along with the victim, she suggests that a similar sacrifice is performed inside the text, in the context of the sacrifice of notions: 'the victim of sacrifice within the text is the discontinuous notion which is ruptured and returned to continuity. Bataille's *image* transgresses, in opening the notion to continuity, in committing the act of sacrifice'.[72] Both the reader and the writer, witnessing the sacrifice of a notion, experience continuity as a '*simulacrum of death*', the term borrowed here from Bataille's contemporary Pierre Klossowski, to describe the recognition, or accord with one's self at the basis of continuity. In this simulacrum of death, the initial sacrifice of a notion leads to a subsequent sacrifice in which reader and writer are themselves the victims, in the impossible state of 'loss *and* gain'.

This model describes the dynamics that operate within the text, showing how the sacrifice of notions is possible without language - or dissociated reality, to return to 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' - forcing a meaning that is other than that of the totality of life: 'It is as if Bataille, in violating the limit protecting the signified from the energy of the signifier, opens the latter to destructive expenditure, thus freeing it from the pressure incurred by its restricted use in the designation and preservation of meaning'.[73] In Bataille's fiction, the 'reality of the bedroom' is transferred to the text intact, due to the function of sacrifice taking place within the text but affecting every relation created by the act of reading.

The world of lovers is for Bataille, a world containing explicitly the man and the woman in their ecstasy and their sacred communion. Their space is completely absorbed by the totality of life; in it, human life is restored to its proper meaning, but

[72] *Ibid*., p. 95
[73] *Ibid*., pp. 97, 98

this containment does not allow for anything else other than itself. The comparison made here is not only between love and fiction, but can go deeper, comparing the dual and the communal. Keeping in mind that the relations provoked by literature, and by Bataille's fiction in particular, are not specific but independent of any identity, we can assume that they are subsequently impersonal and therefore communal. The community of the impersonal, of *whatever* readers, can experience continuity in Bataille's fiction, in the action of reading that becomes collective every time it takes place. The lovers, on the other hand, find continuity in their act of physical union, but this act is deeply personal; a community of lovers cannot exist.

From this declaration Bataille moves to the final solution to his initial problem of the destiny of man, by proposing *myth* as the final answer. Keeping again in mind the historical context of this essay as a response to Kojève's accusations, it is important that we assume that Bataille's propositions here reflect the aims of the College and the secret society of *Acéphale* and therefore their occupation with the meaning of sacred sociology. Myth is offered as the solution to the insufficiency of love to include everything in the world. While the world of lovers only has room for the lovers, myth is able to embrace the whole of human existence:

> Myth alone returns, to the one who is broken by every ordeal, the image of plenitude extended to the community where men gather. Myth alone enters the bodies of those it binds and it expects from them the same receptiveness […]. For myth is not only the divine figure of destiny and the world where this figure moves; it cannot be separated from the community to which it belongs and which ritually assumes its dominion.[74]

While the world of lovers is a dual relationship, myth is communal and cannot be

[74] Bataille, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', p. 232

separated from the community to which it belongs. It is its vital reality and living truth, becoming real each time the common will of the community believes in it, dances it, acts it. As ffrench suggests: 'this belief, moreover, is not meant in the intellectual sense (which would imply a cognitive separation from its object) but a 'possession rituelle' [ritual possession]; myth implies a lack of distinction between the individual or the community and the myth which 'presents' their totality'.[75] In myth, the totality of life is precisely total. The image of myth cannot be distinguished from the community that believes in it, 'it is in solidarity with *total* existence, of which it is the tangible expression'.[76]

On the general question of the qualitative difference between the dual and the communal, the notion of myth presented in this essay can provide a useful answer. Myth is presented as man's destiny, as the answer to the dissociated, broken life of scientists, artists and politicians. It even surpasses the world of lovers in its ability to include the totality of life. This suggests that there exists a superiority of the communal as opposed to the dual. Even though these relations produce the same 'result', the experience of continuity, myth as the representation and embodiment of community is positioned at a higher 'rank'. Life without myth is not really life; it is in a state of decline, of half-life, and this is why Bataille, as the 'sorcerer's apprentice', has taken it upon himself to 'return to the old house of myth',[77] and to find out if the modern world is still capable of myth. In the last chapter of the essay, Bataille, here almost directly addressing Kojeve, outlines the aims of the College, of *Acéphale* and of himself, as the search for myth that constitutes the return to lost totality. As ffrench suggests, 'if history is over, and negativity is left 'sans emploi', a renunciation of action and contentment with sleep is justified […]. Bataille, however, demands the right for *one last chance,*

[75] ffrench, *After Bataille,* p. 21
[76] Bataille, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', p. 232
[77] *Ibid.*

given that an existence without myth would be, as he proposed, unbearably poor'.[78] Bataille, or 'the sorcerer's apprentice', demands this last chance for the sake of humanity, and in doing so, takes the risk of finding out without knowing himself what this search will bring forth; here Bataille positions himself as in complete accordance with life in its totality: life that takes risks.

On July 4, 1939, the last meeting of the College took place, with Bataille speaking alone, defending his positions against the objections presented by Leiris concerning the course that the College had taken. The essay is titled 'The College of Sociology' and in it the meaning of 'sacred sociology' can be glimpsed:

> [I]t is difficult to know to what extent the community is but the favorable occasion for a festival and a sacrifice, or to what extent the festival and the sacrifice bear witness to the love individuals give to the community. In fact, it appears that this question, which might seem simply quaint, appears as the final question of man, and further on as the final question of being.[79]

Again, the communal is presented as the ultimate answer to the question of being, after a comparison to the erotic relationship between man and woman. Bataille compares the above question to the equivalent one on a dual level, which is whether the erotic object (the desired woman) is the ultimate reason for the act of making love, or secondary to the primary need to make love. Further on, the lovers are again compared to the community, in order to accentuate the importance of this question. The lovers lose themselves in one another instead of trying to find themselves, and in so doing they constantly seek 'an even more annihilating expenditure'.[80] Similarly, in terms of the

[78] ffrench, *After Bataille,* p. 22
[79] Georges Bataille, The College of Sociology, in *Visions of Excess,* p. 251
[80] *Ibid.,* p. 252

community, ‘men more religious than others cease to have a narrow concern for the community for which sacrifices are performed. They no longer live for the community; they live for sacrifice’.[81] And further down: ‘just as eroticism slides without difficulty toward the orgy, sacrifice, becoming an end in itself, lays claim to universal value, beyond the narrowness of the community’.[82]

This side-to-side analysis of the lovers and the community suggests that there is between them a unifying factor, but also a dividing one. Earlier in the essay Bataille states that the sacred is ‘communication between beings, and thereby the formation of new beings’.[83] This definition is clearer when it comes to the dual level, the world of lovers, whose union leads eventually to their own death and to the creation of a different, separate being. Through their sacred communication, the ecstasy of their ‘little death’, a new being is created. At the communal level, the sacred communication results in the creation of something with a ‘universal value’. In both levels, what is achieved is the return to continuity, to the totality of being, but whereas in the world of lovers continuity is reached only inside their own contained space, on the level of community, the return to totality comes to include everything in the human life. When sacrifice becomes an end in itself, it acquires a universal value, which even breaks the boundaries of community.

For this universality, however, an initial image of a God is required, a God for whom the sacrifice is made and who serves as the stability to which the one who is lost in sacrifice can return. The question, for Bataille, is the existence of a sacrifice that is an end in itself and that does not offer the stability of a God but rather the choice of losing oneself ‘without remission’. This is the ‘bottomless interrogation’[84] that in Bataille’s view the College has opened up, with the figure of *Acéphale*, a headless man, as the

[81] *Ibid*.
[82] *Ibid*.
[83] *Ibid*., p. 251
[84] *Ibid.,* p. 253

realisation of sacrifice in its absolute sense. *Acéphale* is the figure of the living myth that can return, 'to the one who is broken by every ordeal, the image of a plenitude extended to the community where men gather'.[85] The power of the communal is found in its ability, or rather its need to live the myth, to dance and act it. The community *is* the myth, the two cannot be separated, and through this existence as myth it claims the universal value that goes beyond itself. If the sacred is the communication between beings and the formation of new beings, what is created in collective communication is the totality of being, as the final question of man.

To return to our earlier concerns with the tension between the 'task' and the 'fury', as they emerge in the preface of *Blue of Noon*, we can again see how this becomes a question of writing, and ultimately of reading. Bataille is, one might say, torn between the writer that produces and the artist that transgresses. The text as task is always contrasted to the text as fury. The word fury brings to mind a kind of fight or rebellion against the rules, namely the rules of writing. Bataille's fury is close to his contemporary and friend Maurice Blanchot's analogy of literature and revolution: 'Revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature […]. Revolutionary action explodes with the same force and the same facility as the writer who has only to set down a few words side by side in order to change the world'.[86] Literature for Blanchot leads to 'absolute freedom', as the writer, putting everything into question, turns everything into nothingness. At this 'fabulous moment', as he calls it, 'freedom aspires to be realized in the *immediate* form of *everything* is possible, everything can be done'.[87] Literature is a goal in itself, it is freedom, and for this reason it can never be a task, something that aims at the future and that is entangled into the utility of the things that are useful to a task. The writer does not thus concern

[85] *Ibid*., p. 232
[86] Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire,* Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 319
[87] *Ibid*., p. 318

himself with things and objects individually, in other words, he is not concerned with their utility, but with the world as a whole. In writing down the words side by side, he does not simply specify bits and pieces that exist in the world, but makes manifest *all* of reality, he can 'become that very existence'.[88]

Opposite to Blanchot's revolutionary power of literature, we find Sartre's essay 'Why Write', where he gives an account of the writer/reader relationship. These two agents are inextricably related, the text is created only after 'the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun'.[89] Sartre claims that 'to write is thus both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader'.[90] The text in Sartre's view has the power to disclose the world as it really is, to make it appear, through the task of its reading. Reader and writer both have an obligation to reveal the world through the written words, to fulfil, in other words, its task. In Sartre, there is a moral obligation to change the world through writing and reading, namely to fight injustice by revealing the world in its justice. Sartre appeals to the reader's freedom to interpret the text and change the world, and in this way he invests the text with the quality of a medium, a weapon that can be used in accordance to a good or bad moral consciousness.

Sartre's morality aims at a revolutionary changing of the world, but it is not equivalent to Blanchot's 'morality of revolt'. According to the latter, the text is revolutionary in itself, in that it is in itself freedom, it does not exist outside reality, trying to reveal it, but *is* that reality. Thus, the words, stemming from nothingness, do not constitute a task but are one in themselves: 'Revolutionary action also has the same demand for purity, and the certainty that everything it does has absolute value, that it is not just any action performed to bring about some desirable and respectable goal, but

[88] *Ibid*.
[89] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature? And Other Essays,* Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 58
[90] *Ibid*., p. 65

that it is itself the ultimate goal. The Last Act'.[91] Blanchot's literature is a goal in itself, while Sartre's is a 'job', a task that has to be fulfilled in order to bring about the desired goal.

Bataille, in his writings on surrealism states that 'belief – or, rather, *servitude* to the real world – is, without the shadow of a doubt, fundamental to all servitude. I cannot consider someone free if they do not have the desire to sever the bonds of language within themselves'.[92] Despite his many differences with surrealism, the surrealists' willed insubordination to language is what he considered as their advantage and contribution. At the last sentence of his essay 'On the Subject of Slumbers', he states that 'surrealism has given from the beginning a certain consistency to the 'morality of revolt' and that its most important contribution – important even, perhaps, in the political realm – is to have remained, in matters of morality, a revolution'.[93]

These accounts of writing as a task, or as a moment of fury, are produced in the same generalised moment as Bataille's writing on literature is driven by a 'morality of revolt', and they inform the preface to the *Blue of Noon*. Here Bataille seems to prefer writing as revolution than writing as task. His own moment of fury is far from any connection with utility; he is concerned with writing in a different way, one that corresponds to the event of the death of God and to the limitless possibilities that this event opens up. In the preface to *Blue of Noon,* he reveals the nature of the novel and specifically the role of the reader:

> To a greater or lesser extent, everyone depends on *stories,* on *novels,* to discover the manifold truth of life. Only such stories, read sometimes in a trance, have the power to confront a person with his fate. This is why we must keep passionately striving after what constitutes a *story*: how should we orient our efforts to renew

[91] Blanchot, *The Work of Fire,* p. 319
[92] Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism,* Verso, 1994, p. 49
[93] *Ibid*., p. 53

or, rather, to perpetuate the *novel*?[94]

While the writer is in a state of fury, the reader is in a state of 'trance', as he is confronted with his fate. The connection of reader and writer is apparent here, as the former expects from the latter that he is driven to write, that he is in his turn fulfilling his destiny. The novel, the text, offers the ground for this relationship, where although these two subjects (reader and writer) are not present, they do, nevertheless communicate. The novel embodies the absence of the persons but reveals the essence of their communication which is their common sharing of an experience: trance in the case of the reader, fury in the case of the writer. Both are exposed to the text not as representation and as task, but as communication.

In the preface to the later collection of essays, *Literature and Evil,* Bataille speaks of the essence of literature as 'either the essential or nothing'.[95] The preface ends with the following sentences: 'Literature is *communication.* Communication requires loyalty. A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of Evil, which is the basis of intense communication'.[96] Intense communication is the ultimate nature of literature, its essentiality, and it consists not of the verbal result of words put side by side – that would be similar to words having a task in the world of utility – but of the shared exposure to something that is beyond utility. Bataille's literature corresponds to the death of God, and this requires that words are not subordinate to the laws and rules that existed prior to this event. After the death of God communication is now freed from God's limits, and this means that intense communication cannot be subjected to these limits. Bataille's revolt is against all limits, it is rather the transgression of those limits which results to a non-verbal, 'sacred' communication.

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[94] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 153
[95] Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil,* Marion Boyars, 2006, p. 7
[96] *Ibid*.

In literature, then, lies the key to collective communication. In the relationship between the reader and the writer, the personal disappears. The writer in his moment of fury is absorbed in the text that he created, and so is the reader, in her trance. They both become impersonal, their absence encompassed in the body of the text, which is what 'stages' their communication. The novel does to its subjects what sacrifice does to its participants: in sacrifice, the participants share the moment of transgression; they experience a shared exposure to the sacred. In sacrifice communication is achieved, one that is non-verbal and produced by the collective sharing of the sacred moment. The 'intense communication' of literature also relies on the shared exposure of the moment of fury, to which the writer is driven, and of which the reader perceives as the only motive for writing.

In the first book published under his own name, *Inner Experience,* Bataille states that the profound importance of poetry is the sacrifice of words.

> The object of sacrifice is what man in general abuses, what is exploited. Sacrifice compensates for abuse, for exploitation […]. Abuse, exploitation are what break "communication", sacrifice what reestablishes it, from whence it follows that the choice of sacrificed objects turns on those whose destruction is of a nature to guarantee the return to the communication which abuse put an end to.[97]

In poetry the sacrifice of words takes place in order for communication to appear. If we follow Bataille's thought, words are sacrificed as abuse and exploitation, so as to restore communication. Words are what traditionally produce communication, but for Bataille this in not the case. Words can only achieve that if they are sacrificed, if their meaning is no longer subordinate to the ordinary, to the useful. In poetry words no longer abuse, as they are no longer used to perpetuate what man exploits, but manage to escape the

[97] Bataille, *Inner Experience,* p. 208

useful; they are not anymore a task, but a goal in themselves. From the destruction of words, non-verbal communication arises that restores what the words precisely exploit. The sacrifice of words is ultimately the same as any sacrifice, for it manages to reveal the moment where limits are transgressed. The limits of language are what hold back man's experience of the sacred, and they are the ones that can guarantee, in their destruction, its return. The verbal, thus, is sacrificed for the non-verbal. Fury, trance, derive from the act of writing and reading respectively, but it is in the destruction of words that they fulfil their destiny. The text exists only to be destroyed; in its transgression it is no longer exploitation but communication: the limit is transgressed, momentarily, offering a glimpse of the sacred, in intense communication. It is to the experience of this communication, and its limits, explored by Bataille in *Inner Experience*, that I turn in the following chapter.

Chapter Two: Inner Experience

As with most of Bataille's work, *Inner Experience* is faced with the challenge of its own writing, as a problem related to its content as well as its methodology. In this chapter I aim to explore the extent to which these two poles, content and methodology, are connected and the way in which they inform one another. The style in which the text is written could be described as 'peculiar', as it may appear unstructured, interrupted and fragmented. However, I will argue that this fragmentation serves the book's content in the most fundamental way: the writing of inner experience is the content of the book, and therefore, its *writing,* taken literally, *is* the content of the book.

Bataille's concern for his own writing is evident from the beginning, where at the very first sentence of the preface he states: '*How much I would like to say the same thing of my book that Nietzsche said of the* Gay Science: *"Almost no phrase wherein profundity and playfulness do not tenderly hold hands"'.*[98] This sentence brings the reader face to face with the nature of the book she is about to engage with. There is from the beginning a sense of disappointment, of a goal not reached (how much I would like to say …) as well as an admission of the author's admiration for and connection to Nietzsche's work. This sentence informs not only the content but also the form of the book: profundity and playfulness, in the form of unfinished and interrupted writing. Further down he (again) admits: '*The only parts of this book written with necessity – in accord with my life – are the second,*

[98] *Ibid.*, p. xxxi. Italics in original.

The Torment, *and the last. The others I wrote with the laudable concern of creating a book*'.[99] Writing 'with necessity' and writing 'with the concern of creating a book' are distinguished as two opposite dimensions and they set up clearly the problematic of the whole book: necessity and concern, expenditure and utility, experience and project. The pairs that are presented as the issues that preoccupy Bataille in his work acquire a meaning that surpasses the field of theory, of content, and become manifest in the very act of writing: inner experience also has an exterior, and that is its textual, discursive form. To externalise inner experience, that is the challenge of its author, and furthermore, to externalise inner experience *as* experience, not as knowledge to be attained. This is what Bataille means when he says that 'one must grasp the meaning from the inside [...]. One must *live* experience'.[100]

In order to infer the connection between content and methodology, a clear understanding of the 'theoretical' notions that are manifest throughout the text is necessary. Bataille states in the preface that '[*t*]*he self-acknowledged suffering of the disintoxicated is the subject of this book*'.[101] In this 'summary' of *Inner Experience* the fundamental concepts of this text can be traced and treated as the starting point for our problem.

Bataille sets as a basis for his thought the human condition, which is dependent on and constellates around man's only certainties: that he is not everything and that he will die. The desire to be everything is the desire to be equated with the universe, to surpass his limited existence in a merging with its totality. This is a desire that will never be satisfied, but also one that is inevitable.

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[99] *Ibid*. Italics in original.
[100] *Ibid.*, p. 8
[101] *Ibid.*, p. xxxii

Man will continue to desire the unattainable, and he will try to render his limited existence bearable with several means that have the character of narcotics. Narcotics create illusions that offer a sense of adequacy to man's insufficient existence: he sets projects on himself which conceal his condition and the void that lies in front of him once the desire to be everything is set aside. He wants to know everything, using knowledge in this sense to become himself everything. For the man who is absorbed in projects, in the 'hazy illusions' that disguise his insufficiency, experience is not attainable; experience demands that man questions everything, his very being, all that is known to him and even knowledge itself. For the man, therefore, who ceases to desire to be everything, who has no authority other than experience, there is no project, no illusions, no narcotics, but only his 'self-acknowledged suffering'. For him, 'the disintoxicated man', non-knowledge is the extreme limit, and he finds himself amidst the void of a night where knowledge, project, now takes the form of 'babbling' that can only disturb this night.[102] This intolerable babbling is nothing other than language, or rather its discursive abuse that condemns humanity to an endless subordination to utility. The abuse of language mirrors that of our existence, also dominated by the limited domains of project and utility.

To begin with, this book is itself a project. Its author has undertaken a task, which is nothing other than the writing of this book. The clash between project and experience is evident and Bataille himself states it clearly on numerous occasions, where he interrupts the flow of his writing in order to explain, or to justify this difficulty inherent in the text: 'The expression of inner experience must in some way respond to

[102] *Ibid.*

its movement – cannot be a dry verbal tradition to be executed on command'.103 What he opposes to project is not a 'negative mood', but the positive 'spirit of decision'.104 This means that experience can and must be expressed through the very thing that it is opposed to, that is, language. Not to speak of it is not a victory but a flight from the problem. The silence that avoids the abuse of discourse is part of the abuse itself, it does not escape its web but remains entangled in it. On the other hand, decision obliges one to find a way through language, to change it from the inside, to give to 'silence' a meaning other than that of an empty word. Decision as the 'inverse of project' is direct, with no detours, with no delays. The detours of language, where everything is linked to a concern for utility and for the future are abolished, together with the power that words have. The power of discourse is that of turning everything into project, thus determining one's whole being. Man knows himself through this construction, he has become project himself, and therefore, to escape the domination of discourse is to forget all that he knows of himself.

> *Nevertheless inner experience is project, no matter what. It is such – man being entirely so through language which, in essence, with the exception of its poetic perversion, is project. But project is no longer in this case that, positive, of salvation, but that, negative, of abolishing the power of words, hence of project.*[105]

Hence, experience is a project which is not a project, just as 'silence is a word which is not a word and breath an object which is not an object'.[106] These examples of 'slipping words'[107] can illuminate the connection that exists between content and method. Silence is the abolition of the sound that the word makes and in its perversion we can glimpse the answer to the subordination to language: silence is

103 *Ibid.*, p. 6
104 *Ibid., p. 6.*
[105] *Ibid*., p. 22. Italics in original.
[106] *Ibid*., p. 16
[107] *Ibid.*

still a word, but one that destroys the task of words. Its power lies in the fact that it is able to do so from the inside: language is penetrated from within its own fabric, in a destruction that is not negative, it does not avoid the challenge, but positive, leading to the creation of something new. To be silent is not to speak while speaking, this paradox informing the solution to the theoretical problem of *Inner Experience* as well as the methodological challenge of writing while not writing.

Experience is project because of humanity's dependency on language. This statement makes manifest the fact that project here is a problem in two occasions. First of all, inner experience, as the state that man is invited to reach, is a project. This is an issue of content in the sense that what Bataille is writing about is something that is itself immersed into language, so long as man himself also is. Second, the very fact that Bataille is writing about it gives rise to a different issue, that of method. The means of expression is language, and this presents inner experience, as the subject of a book, with the character of a project that is apparent and indisputable. In the first case, in order for experience to become the abolition of project, man has to escape the abuse of discourse in his very being. In the second case, in order for the book to escape the character of project which is necessarily inherent to it, discourse has to be treated in a very specific way: the words, the writing, must follow the spirit of decision:

> *A continual challenging of everything deprives one of the power of proceeding by separate operations, obliges one to express oneself through rapid flashes, to free as much as is possible the expression of one's thought from a project, to include*

everything in a few sentences: anguish, decision and the right to poetic perversion of words without which it would seem that one was subject to a domination.[108]

The style in which *Inner Experience* is written is faithful to its content as escape from project. Experience is putting everything into question, and so is its writing. The domination of language can only end in the direct manner of decision, where everything is happening 'on the spot'. The author is obliged to write in rapid flashes that can preserve the character of inner experience as opposition to project. Bataille's thought is the thought of experience, and what he is communicating to the reader is this thought in its pure state, uninterrupted by project. This kind of communication from writer to reader can only be achieved through rapid flashes that reflect the immediacy or the 'being in the instant' of decision. In this sense, the method meets the content: the text escapes the domination of language in anguish, decision and poetic perversion, in the same way that man frees himself from project. The text becomes the body of experience, in the sense that it takes the form of the matrix through and by which it is destroyed as matrix. The body of language is transformed from the inside, where its own limits are transgressed, in accordance with the principle of inner experience, which is 'to emerge through project from the realm of project'.[109]

Using the metaphor of 'the body of experience' to refer to the text of *Inner Experience* should, at this point, be taken literally, for, as Denis Hollier points out in *Against Architecture,* 'no metaphor is innocent'.[110] With the aid of psychoanalysis, Hollier emphasizes the connection of the book as knowledge, to the mother's body as the ultimate search for knowledge. In psychoanalytic terms, the child's desire

[108] *Ibid*., p. 28. Italics in original.
[109] *Ibid*., p. 46
[110] Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture*, *The Writings of Georges Bataille*, MIT Press, 1992, p. 32

for knowledge is equal to knowing where it comes from, in other words, to knowing what the mother's desire is. The answer to the riddle of the mother's desire is *the name of the father*, which takes its place, and is given as the first answer to the desire for knowledge. Science is the equivalent of the name of the father, while the maternal body, the locus of the mother's desire, is destined to a space outside science, or, to a space inside science where it is reconstructed as metaphor: 'by metaphor, therefore, the place of knowledge is displaced from the mother's body into the pages of a book'.[111] If science's aim is to construct this metaphor, and psychoanalysis' aim is to deconstruct it, Bataille's attitude is somewhere in the middle: Bataille does not uncover the secret, he does not explain to his readers what his book signifies. Rather he lets them discover inside the book the maternal body, he lets them experience the body of the book unmediated by metaphor or by any sort of concrete explanation. Bataille's readers are not analysands, but *readers,* who, holding the open book in their hands, can only read; not by undoing the metaphor of the book as maternal body, but by directly plunging into it.

> Reading confirms a form by covering it with a mathematical cloak. But the mathematical garment, while providing form, covers up nudity. To read *Madame Edwarda* (to read Bataille, to read – if we knew how to read) would be to undo the book, to bare the absence of a ground, the absence of anything beneath things. To bare the formless nakedness of a slit.[112]

Hollier in the above passage brings together *Madame Edwarda's* preface in which Bataille urges the reader to 'read, if he is afraid of everything', and the poem

[111] *Ibid*., p. 155
[112] *Ibid*., p. 159

Le Livre, the final poem of the posthumous volume of *La Tombe de Louis XXX*, which he quotes earlier in the book.[113] In this poem, the metaphor is inverted: it is not the book that is the maternal body, but the woman who is like the book ('I drink from your slit/ and I spread your naked legs/ I open them like a book/ where I read what kills me'). There is no knowledge to be gained from the book, apart from, perhaps, the knowledge that death unveils, which cannot in any sense be classified under the utilitarian definition of knowledge. What death unveils, that is the 'secret' of the book, is given precisely when knowledge is absent, or, in other words, when the name of the father is absent. This is most evident in Bataille's fiction, where to read is an active participation in the de-sublimation of the book, in the undoing of metaphor. I will argue in what follows, that every reading of Bataille has this de-sublimating effect, as the metaphor it undoes is always there, in every writing and every text: the metaphor of the text as the body of knowledge.

Inner Experience is the book that undoes its own metaphor as the body of knowledge, through its reading. Reading it brings to the fore what is supposed to be looming in the background: that the body of knowledge is the maternal body. The latter is supposed to be replaced by the former, in other words, one metaphor has to be replaced by another, one that is prescribed by the name of the father. However, *Inner Experience* leaves no place for any kind of metaphor. The book itself is 'what death reveals', it is non-knowledge, not by interpretation or analysis, but by essence. The essence of the book is revealed in the mere act of reading (if we knew how to read), and not in the analysis of this reading. This is in accordance with the immediacy that *Inner Experience* requires both of its writing and of its reading.

[113] *Ibid*., p. 157

The problem of mediation is presented here as something that has to be overcome both in those two axes: writing and reading. In the first instance, Bataille writes in rapid flashes in order not to allow for language to distort the written text. The 'first phase', from Bataille's pen to the ink inscribed on the book's paper, is a process that has to overcome the distorting power of discourse. The act of writing is inherently connected to the production of knowledge, in other words, it is caught up in the metaphor that demands of the book that it is presented as the body that gives birth to concepts, to meanings. To invert the metaphor, to present the book as non-knowledge, as the body that gives birth to a not-knowing subject, presupposes that all metaphor has to be abolished. Words and sentences that express not meaning but the absence of meaning have to be the product of something that escapes mediation and that finally, has no authority through which it can acquire any sort of symbolism. When the name of the father is absent, unheard, the maternal body appears to be the authority. However:

> And above all, 'nothing', I know 'nothing' – I moan this like a sick child,
> whose attentive mother holds his forehead (mouth open over the basin).
> But I don't have a mother, the basin is the starry sky (in my poor nausea,
> it is thus).[114]

I will suggest that the above quotation can serve as a guideline towards an understanding of the tension between knowledge and non-knowledge, as it highlights the significance of the process of writing and reading of the book. It is a passage that manages, through its linguistic as well as visual elements, to give an account of the conditions that lead to inner experience, in other words, the conditions for the supposed transformation that takes place on the journey from meaning to non-sense.

[114] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 48

To begin with, the mother is dead and all that is left is the starry sky as a basin. Thus the sublimating metaphor is reduced to nothing but the sky, the indifferent universe. What is important here is that between the subject and the sky no mediation can be found. 'Nothing', is not subject to the condition of becoming a concept. The attentive mother that would console the sick child, giving meaning to nothingness, is absent. Nothingness, therefore, is not just another concept in the infinite web of knowledge, but precisely the limit of knowledge: mouth over the basin becomes mouth over the starry sky that is the basin, and the subject can do nothing other than lose itself in the nothing of non-knowledge. Metaphor as mediation then, is destroyed via its own authority. The phrase 'the basin is the starry sky', does of course obey the rules of metaphor, it is even a very good example for it. However, what makes metaphor disappear in its own construction is the fact of the absence of any authority. Without a regulating authority, the basin *is* the starry sky. It does not resemble it, nor does it stand *for* it, but, it *is* it. Here, the copula has no transformative power; it is to be taken literally. 'Is', *is* the third person of the verb 'to be' and nothing more. This is how Bataille writes about non-knowledge: through unmediated images that submit to no (external) authority.

Hollier discusses the importance of the mouth in Bataillean terms, in reference to the article with the same title published in *Documents* ('Mouth'), and its position alongside other entries in this dictionary, namely 'The Big Toe', 'Eye' and 'Formless', which can help clarify at this point the position of the open mouth over the basin in the above extract. To begin with, the purpose of the dictionary is a general displacement of the parts of the human body from their assumed position both in their biological and intellectual sense: 'the dictionary is a discourse that makes the organ suddenly emerge as a partial object, irrecuperable

for the purposes of constructing a whole body image'.[115] The mouth as partial object in this context is not presented as part of the whole, which provides it with a purpose, and therefore as a means towards an end. It is an object on its own terms, which, moreover, does not fall under the hierarchy of the whole and therefore does not respect the role it is given. In this instance, the mouth is no longer the 'speaking object', or the 'alimentary object' or even the 'vomiting object'. While here, the word 'object' can be replaced by the word 'organ', for that is precisely what it designates (a function of the whole, or a tool/organ in the body), the partial object, the mouth of the *Documents*, cannot be reduced to just that.

The displacement that Bataille achieves with the 'Mouth' entry, according to Hollier, is the following: firstly, the mouth is no longer regarded as the half open organ of speech which belongs to the ideological/horizontal axis of man, but is forced upon the biological/vertical axis, where his 'animality' is most evident but also altered by his stature as a standing being. This is achieved by regarding the mouth as irreversibly open, by the spasms of laughter, pain or pleasure. Secondly, posited at the top of the body, the mouth achieves an annihilation of the high/low opposition, which leads to a confusion or merging of the corresponding assimilation/excretion opposition. Thirdly, the irreversibly open mouth does not articulate words but utters sounds and cries whose nature is that of material emission rather than meaningful articulation. The mouth over the starry sky, in the quotation highlighted above, is the equivalent of the mouth of the *Documents*: without a mother, the authority that has the role of providing the entities that surround us with meaning is absent. This leads to a subsequent absence of all meaning, or of all ground from which to deduce meaning. What is left is the void,

[115] Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 78

and therefore the mouth is no longer the organ connected to a meaningful universe but the object which links us to a universe which is unknown in every sense: an irreversibly open mouth, not succumbing to the discontinuous demands of human sickness (over the basin) but open to the continuity of the sky. It consists in this sense of the cavity whose biological/intellectual functions are rendered null by the fact that its only 'use' is to take in the universe, or be taken in by the universe. It is now the hole that eliminates the distance between the subject and continuity, making the mediation that the biological/intellectual mouth offers redundant.

It might be useful at this point to consider an entry from another dictionary, for the purposes of clearing up the notion of the mouth as a partial object in Bataille's sense. In the *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Dylan Evans pinpoints the origin and meaning of the partial-object as follows:

> However, whereas Klein defines these objects as partial because they are only part of a whole object, Lacan takes a different view. They are partial […] because they represent only partially the function that produces them. In other words, in the unconscious only the pleasure-giving function of these objects is represented, while their biological function is not represented. Furthermore, Lacan argues that what isolates certain parts of the body as a part-object is not any biological given but the signifying system of language.[116]

In psychoanalytic theory the part object (primarily the mother's breast, the faeces, the phallus and the urinary flow) is separated either because of its position inside the whole, or because of its isolated function in the unconscious. Function is here the basic concern, however symbolic or even displaced it may be. Inside the

[116] Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, 1996, p. 135

psychoanalytic discourse, the part object is inserted into the schema of the psyche, in other words, it is part of this discourse, which ultimately signifies that it is a replacement or a symbol for something else, something whole. Bataille's mouth as a partial object cannot be said to be part of something bigger, and its 'function' is that it disorients the notion of function itself. Also, the fact that the part object is found as an entry inside a 'proper' dictionary of a 'proper' discourse - that of psychoanalysis - is on its own, indicative of the difference between the two. The mouth, the big toe, the eye, cannot fit into a dictionary of this kind, simply because their definition is unspeakable, in the sense that what they designate is an abolition or a turning around of meaning. In other words, psychoanalysis uses meaning in order to infer the displaced value of the part object, while Bataille takes the partial object out of the system that generates meaning, refusing to it an explanation that can be given via this system of knowledge. If the isolation of the part object in Lacanian psychoanalysis is due to the signifying system of language, in Bataillean terms, the partial object is isolated precisely because it is situated outside of this system. It is, furthermore, outside, because of its refusal of the hierarchical position designated to it by language.

Julia Kristeva in her essay 'Bataille, Experience and Practice', discusses in psychoanalytic terms Bataille's thought and its 'sovereign operation'. Psychoanalysis is in its foundation the analysis of tales, the first one being that of Oedipus, created as an attempt to master the past experience of the individual. The tale therefore, is structured through desire and mediated via language, and constitutes in this sense the semiotic structure that corresponds to the unification of the subject in its Oedipal relation through the desire and the castration

articulated within it.[117] While fiction repeats the formation of the subject in its Oedipal desiring and castrating state, the sovereign operation is something different: it does not repeat the operation of fiction, but reveals precisely what Oedipus conceals. Through the themes that it represents, it traverses Oedipus and what exceeds Oedipus. This trans-Oedipus does not propose new laws to replace the old ones but contests them infinitely by showing the fiction that founds them and that they repress.

Bataille's writing in Kristeva's analysis, constitutes a sovereign operation because it represents through his themes experiences of rupture in a radical heterogeneity: '[t]his series of themes will resemble the erotic novel or the philosophical essay – it matters little; what is important, is that the violence of thought be introduced there where thought loses itself'.[118] Bataille's writings introduce this element of violent thought because they represent a thought situated at the limit, which for that reason exceeds representation. If Oedipus has the role of the sublimating paradigm that represses its origins, Bataille's trans-Oedipus in Kristeva's schema, allows free reign to the repressed; but this does not mean that his thought is that of a return of the pre-Oedipal, following the discipline of the psychoanalytic 'explanatory' discourse, but rather that it exposes the limit of thought, where knowledge is no longer able to constitute the subject.

I will suggest that this Oedipus loses his power to generate meaning, and therefore, the tale is left in its nakedness, in the space where sublimation is replaced by non-knowledge. Inner experience constitutes that space in which Oedipus is powerless. Although he is the starting point, the founder of the subject,

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[117] Julia Kristeva, 'Bataille, Experience and Practice', in, *On Bataille*, *Critical Essays*, ed. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 249
[118] *Ibid*., p. 247

his role changes from that of the guardian of the subject's structure to that of the mere witness of its destruction. What gave meaning to the subject, both in the sense of its own self-consciousness as well as consciousness of the world surrounding it, is annihilated. The discourse that served as a link, or barrier between it and the rational world is abolished in the transgression of inner experience, and this is precisely what constitutes the condition of non-knowledge: that the knowledge-generating factor, which necessarily exists and serves as the starting point for the process, is transgressed via the overcoming of its own authority.

To return to the extract from *Inner Experience*; there are two distinct phases in this passage: the attentive mother holding the sick child's forehead over the basin, and the subject, who is now motherless, with his mouth open to the starry sky. In the first instance, the mouth is the organ of discourse. It is the speaking, eating, vomiting mouth, obeying the rules of discourse and faithful to the demands of the whole. Its function is to respond to the sickness of the body to which it belongs, and which alone can provide it with a meaningful existence: as part of the whole. If we were to make the connection to the psychoanalytic discourse, we would suggest that it is precisely this discourse that provides the connection to meaning, via the hierarchy it proposes. In the second instance, however, the mouth is situated outside of every discourse. There is no longer any correlation between it and the symbolised reality of everyday life, but only the void that is opened up and in which it is submerged. Inner experience is portrayed in this way as an overcoming of project, as the contestation of every authority other than that of experience's itself, and also as a loss of the self.

In this passage, we must also pay attention to the notion of 'sickness' and its significance. Michael Richardson, in part three ('Human Becoming') of the essential writings of Georges Bataille, has included a chapter titled 'Sickness and Laughter', at the beginning of which he suggests: 'to engage with sickness is to engage with one's own powerlessness. It is to engage directly with the recognition of death, and our perception of the world is dependent upon how we respond to this recognition'.[119] Sickness presents death as a threat to our discontinuous beings, but, it is - like work - serious. In sickness our mortality becomes apparent and the world is put into question. We either succumb to it, or choose to laugh, to 'actively participate in the very absurdity of the world, turning it back on itself'.[120] The question therefore, is our attitude at the face of death. Laughter liberates, it opens the way to inner experience, while sickness binds us to discontinuity. The sick child, moaning over the basin is bound up in discontinuity, receiving consolation or treatment from the mother. Sickness fights back mortality, by grasping onto discontinuity, to the discourse of utility. But the mother is dead; the basin is the starry sky, the mouth is open to the immense universe. Sickness is not treated, the response to death is not a flight towards usefulness but an opening up towards experience. In the face of the absurdity of death, laughter is the appropriate response, not the seriousness of work. Sickness is in need of a ground, or rather a roof, which marks the limit of finality and provides a measure for existence. The universe, however, roofless, without mother and without limit does not provide anything but continuity. Without the limit, one is in complete accordance with the starry sky.

[119] Georges Bataille, *Essential Writings*, ed. Michael Richardson, Sage Publications, 1998, p. 108
[120] *Ibid*.

I will argue that sickness as the impairment of physiological function of the organism is the broader category in which Bataille's own impairment falls when he writes: 'a feeling of impotence […] I would like, as well, to go to bed, to cry, to fall asleep'.[121] His writing is interrupted by an intense feeling of fatigue, which threatens to reduce the process of creating the book of inner experience to a mere project. Fatigue, cold, forgetting and even boredom appear throughout the text as interruptions that make the writing of experience impossible. However, it is precisely these moments of the author's 'incompetence' that sustain inner experience *inside the text.* Experience, as such, has a place in temporality as instantaneous and direct: it is lived by the subject, in its interiority and immediacy. Therefore, in the context of the book, of the project, experience demands this interruption. It cannot be presented with an ending, as the project cannot be finished, it cannot reach a point in totality.

In his book *After Bataille, Sacrifice, Exposure, Community,* Patrick ffrench discusses the incorporation of the quotations of Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure* into *Inner Experience* and clarifies their place and operation inside the text: Blanchot's fiction manages to express the experience of the extreme, precisely because of its writing as fiction, as 'a narrative voice in which the experience, the anxiety, is maintained, inserted into a temporal frame (the *récit*), and controlled in a writing of absolute authority'.[122] Bataille's experience, on the contrary, cannot maintain the instant in which it is obtained. Part of writing experience lies in the very maintenance of the instant, which is to say that a complete narrative is excluded from this project from the beginning and in accordance to its most fundamental principle. Therefore, experience has to be interrupted, if it is to be

[121] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 41
[122] ffrench, *After Bataille*, p. 122

written in accordance with its own rules, and inevitably resist the completion towards which it nevertheless tends. Completion lies beyond language, and this is why Blanchot's fictional writing is able to express it while Bataille's 'theoretical' writing cannot. Stripped of metaphor, experience must be written as it is, without mediation, and inevitably interrupted by its demands. Fatigue interrupts the text in the same way that it interrupts the author's thought. If the thought is itself unfinished, it is so not by literary incompetence, but rather by an incompetence that is intrinsic in this very thought. As ffrench points out, 'in the light of his relation to Blanchot, Bataille appears as a writer who constantly struggled to give a consistent expression to his thought, but whose thought is inconsistent, unfinished, exposed, interrupted by the contingent, by *what happens*'.[123] This 'what happens', the immediacy of experience is what prevents the book from being finished, from reaching completion.

Incompletion therefore, is a characteristic of Bataille's writing, which again brings together content and methodology. Writing follows thought, or rather, thought and writing occur simultaneously. Bataille writes:

> Of the successive characters that I am, I do not speak. […] I am my words – evoking an inner experience – without having to challenge them. […] With respect to the inner experience of which I speak, they are deprived of meaning, except in this respect: that they complete my disharmony.[124]

Harmony, as Bataille informs us, is inseparable from project, it is the means for its realisation and it demands that the one engaged with it waits patiently, renouncing one's passions for calmness. Harmony, through repetition, aims at perfection and

[123] *Ibid*., p. 127
[124] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 56

duration, via an annulment of time. Experience, on the contrary, has a place in the moment, it cannot be sustained, and therefore it responds to disharmony. That 'the words complete my disharmony' makes manifest the inherent paradox in inner experience: the words are completed only in incompletion/disharmony. Words *are* the author, and their 'task' is to remain in complete accordance with him: 'Bataille's thought thus, has to be considered as irreducibly tied to the mode of its experiencing, its speed, its impatience, its relation to the contingency of moments of fatigue, of anxiety'.[125] Disharmony is completed only in incompleteness, and only through thought's interruption by the demands of experience. Writing experience is the same process as thinking experience, and inevitably, as living experience. Therefore, the author, the thinker, and the subject of experience, are guided by the same principles of disharmony that do not leave any room for patient waiting, but rather tend towards an immediate experience that translates into the 'disastrous rapidity' of the text. Following the above quotation the text continues:

I can't go on, I moan.

I can no longer bear

My prison.

I say this

bitterly:

Words which stifle me –

Leave me,

[125] ffrench, *After Bataille*, p. 119

Release me […][126],

after which a new paragraph follows, beginning with the sentence: 'Almost every time, if I tried to write a book, fatigue would come before the end'.[127] The succession in this extract from *Inner Experience* is indicative of the connection between writing, thought and experience: in the first place there is the fundamental opposition of project to experience which informs the book and provides the principle under which it is written. The author is himself the embodiment of experience and he cannot be separated from that which he thinks or that which he writes. Following this 'theoretical presentation' (in the sense that Bataille, in this instance, makes claims on the nature of experience and presents some of its characteristics), we are presented with what we can call a 'poetic intervention', where Bataille's words are written in the form of a poem, in which these exact words are presented as a burden: 'words which stifle me […] I want death/and not to admit of/this reign of words'.[128] We could argue that in this second phase, this poem takes on the form of an experiment, at the heart of the use or abuse of language. The question here is presented thus: could words - and even more so, written words - 'complete disharmony'? What would be their form, their appearance, their sound, even their content? These words written in the form of a poem constitute the reply. The poem is written in italics, in short verses, many of which consisting of only one word. Furthermore, through these words the writer depicts his own torment, whose cause is nothing other but these very words. The circular character of the text here leads to a merging of the words with the author and with the subject of experience, in a way that does not allow for a clear

[126] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 56-57
[127] *Ibid*.
[128] *Ibid*. p, 57

separation of the succession. The final schema resembles something like the following: the writer writes the words that destroy him, at the same moment that he himself *is* his own words, and therefore, he is necessarily heading towards destruction through his own being; but that is precisely what inner experience is: losing oneself in/via the destruction of the project.

This is how Bataille writes this process which, moreover, by necessity, is interrupted in the third phase by fatigue. With an abrupt change in the writing style, the new paragraph begins with the admittance of the impossibility of the non-project of writing experience. It cannot be complete, *what happens* always interrupts the writing before the end. The climax, the complete immerse into inner experience presupposes that its subject is outside of knowledge, outside of the book. Fatigue, unbearable sleepiness, laziness, cold, bring the writer back to his position as writer. It is important at this point to emphasise that these extracts come from *The Torment*, the only part of the book written with necessity, as its author claims. This part is not only *about* the torment. It actually *is* the torment and its writing cannot be separated from what it aims to reveal.

Bataille thus, if he is to write the Torment *as torment*, must follow the demands of his 'tormented thought', remaining faithful to the rapid flashes, and short sentences that must include everything. The notion of the 'rapid flashes' brings to mind Michel Foucault's essay 'A Preface to Transgression', where he proposes the image of a lightning in the night to illuminate the relationship between transgression and the limit:

> Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the

> stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty, and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.[129]

The flash of light is made manifest only inside the night from which it emerges. It comes from darkness and illuminates this darkness; it is not its opposite but something like a complementary factor to it. Transgression marks the limit where everything is questioned in a positive way, in the sense that existence is not denied but affirmed in the most extreme way: at its limit, the naked, 'pure' state of being is manifested, in its accordance to an incomprehensible void. The image of the rapid flash includes all the characteristics of transgression that Bataille is, in this instance, obliged to express himself with. The element of rapidity, of the instant, is inherent in the image of the flash, which only appears momentarily before it disappears again into the darkness. The light, the brightness of the flash is also unique in the sense that it illuminates nothing external but its own surrounding, that is, the night. Light is usually thought of as the medium that makes objects appear, that gives meaning, or names the external world. In this case however, the flash names the obscurity of the darkness, in other words, it gives a name to the unnamable. It illuminates nothing but its own limit and the darkness from which it comes and which allows for it to appear.

In the sphere of language, and specifically in the context of writing inner experience, the rapid flashes that Bataille writes in tear the fabric of discourse revealing its own limit. The babbling suddenly stops and the night in which language is no longer abused is revealed. The words that are designated to offer meaning to the world and to link each object to its function collapse in the

[129] Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', p. 28

darkness that is now the only meaningful entity; but this meaning, devoid of usefulness, is not only fundamentally different to discourse, but also outside of its rules. Non-knowledge in this sense is the only form of knowledge. In order to destroy language from the inside, the words must, emerging from within language, self-destruct never reaching the point of designating the use of things but rather the complete opposite: this is accomplished by writing in rapid sentences that do not allow for a completion, but rather for a continuous interruption of the text.

The structure of *Inner Experience* is the symptom of its author's urge to write immediately, according to the principles of the book's content. This is accomplished by the use of images and metaphors that have the quality of the 'rapid flash', that are able to convey the immediacy that is necessary for avoiding project. The text appears as a combination of almost unfinished thoughts, interrupted by violent sentences and images that have the character of a shock. In this way, the parts of the book rather than completing each other, manage to *incomplete* each other, providing the final text with the form of experience, or of non-project: the text escapes utility, according to the goal it has set to accomplish.

In the chapter titled 'The Torment', the flow of the text is interrupted with the insertion of long paragraphs of memories, of 'experiences', as well as sentences of personal despair and moments of intolerable fatigue. In one instance Bataille writes:

> The difficulty, in despair, is to be whole: however, the words, as I write, fail me . . . [...] Moreover words designate poorly what the human being experiences: I say "despair" – one must understand me: here I am defeated, in the depths of cold, inhaling an odor of death, at the same time lethargic,

> committed to my destiny, loving it – like an animal its little ones - no longer desiring anything. [130]

The words fail him, but he does not avoid them. The failing words are incorporated in the text, and their character as failure is precisely what is of crucial importance for the text. The text is written despite its being failure and it thus allows for the project to emerge through project: the paradox is not presented as something to overcome, but as the necessary condition for writing. A thought that is disastrous, that aims to escape the limits of knowledge, can only be expressed in an equally disastrous language, or not expressed at all. There is no middle ground for the project of inner experience: both its actual experience and its writing must adhere to the extreme limit to which they belong, and which in both cases is similar to a torment: the torment of facing the impossible and the torment of writing the impossible.

The problematic of *writing* inner experience brings us to the issue of *reading* inner experience, with the reader as the intended recipient of this 'tormented' thought. Bataille writes for him, the anonymous reader, and through him he becomes the anonymous writer. The text is the space where communication occurs, but one that is outside of discourse. Through the discursive medium par excellence, the text, a relation is established that abolishes all discourse. The writer 'gives himself to non-knowledge', in his anguish and solitude, and the reader surrenders to this non-knowledge, again, in her own anonymity. Communication occurs inside the void that inner experience opens up, leaving objects, names and personalities outside.

[130] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 38

'Should some sort of expression give evidence of it: the extreme limit is distinct from it. It is never literature. [...] When the extreme limit is there, the means which serve to attain it are no longer there'.[131] Bataille in this instance is commenting on Rimbaud's 'refusal to communicate', arguing that it is not his last poem that has reached the extreme limit, but his decision to stop writing poetry. Communication here, takes place literally at the medium's absence. However, Bataille does not refuse to write, but tries to find the way to communicate in discourse's absence, through discourse. The text of *Inner Experience* is not in itself communication, but it opens up the space in which communication occurs, that is, the obscure relationship between reader and writer. The objective is to annul through their fusion the means that discourse consists of, in order to make manifest, in its absence, inner experience; in this case, the experience of reading *and* the experience of writing.

The reader's significance or role in inner experience is expressed in these sentences: 'The *third*, the companion, the reader who acts upon me is discourse. [...] [B]ut I tolerate the action of project in that it is a link with this obscure *other* sharing my anguish, my torment, desiring my torment as much as I desire his'.[132] Inner experience is always shared. In writing inner experience, Bataille creates the other. The relationship is formed instantaneously, with the very act of writing. It is through discourse that anguish is shared, and project is the link. In this sense, it is not only tolerated but necessary. For Bataille, inner experience demands that man loses himself in communication, at the meeting point of human possible existences. The other has to exist in order to be part of the communication that annuls him: 'I write for one, who, entering into my book, would fall into it as into a hole, who

[131] *Ibid*., p 50
[132] *Ibid*., pp. 60, 61

would never again get out'.[133] At the moment that the reader ceases to be an other for the writer, and vice versa, communication is attained. The book takes the form of the abyss, where the reader enters without any hope of getting out. If this connection fails, in other words, if the reader approaches the text as knowledge to be attained from the outside, inner experience has also failed. The subject of the book depends on its reading in that it justifies its content. Bataille's destructive writing demands the reader's destructive reading: if the reader is discourse, the project that forces Bataille to write, she must also destroy herself in this reciprocal relationship. Discourse can only be transformed by itself, by the reader in this case. This presupposes that *Inner Experience* cannot be read with a pedagogical interest; its knowledge is non-knowledge, its language is the destruction of language.

I would like to turn at this point to Jean-Luc Nancy's, essay 'Exscription', where he explores the community that is maintained through Bataille's writing. This writing is rather the 'play' of writing against meaning, beyond decoding, and has the power to expose the very nakedness of writing:

> It is a community in that Bataille immediately communicates to me that pain and that pleasure which result from the impossibility of communicating anything at all without touching the limit where all meaning spills out of itself like a simple ink stain on a word, on the word "meaning".[134]

The community that is established, manages to do so not by the decoding of words into meaning, but via the immediate experience of reading at the limit that which is written at the limit. What this community demonstrates, according to Nancy, is

[133] *Ibid.*, p. 116
[134] Nancy, 'Exscription', p. 47

that '[w]riting, and reading, is to be exposed, to expose oneself to this not-having (to this not-knowing) and thus to "exscription"'.[135] The relationship that is formed in the act of writing and reading is one that is revealed only in the abolition of its signification, when, in other words, there is nothing left but ink stains, the external body of words empty of internal meaning, or, merely corpses of words. Taking this metaphor further, I will argue that it is only through the death of meaning that naked existence can be seen, which as Nancy again puts it, 'is what is the very place of meaning, but which has no meaning'.[136] The book of *Inner Experience* is this exposure that makes manifest existence in exscription, in the writing of non-meaning, which reveals its essence outside the book; that there is communication outside of language, that is what the text says, and by saying it, it simultaneously confirms it, with the abolition of meaning for the sake of communication.

Death as the ultimate transgression is what is always evident in the text of *Inner* Experience: dead words, dead text, even a dead author. This cannot help but bring to mind Roland Barthes' famous essay 'The Death of the Author'. Barthes proposes that every modern reading must necessarily begin with the death of the author. With the author now dead, the text is free from his ownership/authority, and open not to a deciphering of a hidden meaning but to a disentanglement of the multiplicity that is writing. The only place that the multiple dimensions of writing are gathered is in the reader who is, as Barthes suggests, without history, biography or psychology. The death of the author, then, signifies the end of absolute meaning, and acquires the revolutionary and liberating activity of the refutation of authority, 'since to refuse fixed meaning is, in the end, to refuse God

[135] *Ibid*., p. 64
[136] *Ibid*.

and his hypostases – reason, science, law'.[137] The authority over the text shifts from the author to the reader, from the origin to the destination, and furthermore, the text is, after the author's death, 'eternally written *here and now'*.[138] This is due to the fact that the author's past is now irrelevant to the text, and therefore there is no room for a connection to a certain before and after.

With the death of the author, the reader is liberated from the reign of meaning, in the sense that he is entitled to 'disentangle' the multiple combinations of pre-existing writings without being forced to a deciphering according to the authority of their origin. Barthes calls this an 'anti-theological activity' which moves from the personal to the impersonal. The reader therefore, is the one who decides on the meaning of the text, which is written here and now namely, every time the text is read. What is important for our own reading of *Inner Experience* is that, in Barthes' sense, the death of the author is more of a transition of authority rather than a total abolition of it. Although the meaning of the text is not anymore that of a secret to be deciphered as it depends solely on the reader's perception, and the text of the dead author is a space of multiple quotations with no connection to their original 'father', with no fixed meaning, however, there still is some sort of meaning to be found. If we were to make the comparison to the psychoanalytic discourse once more, we could argue that, while the name of the father is absent, and therefore the author/god or science/reason/law equations have no authority over the text, meaning is still formulated. Authority is not dissolved along with the death of the author/father, but in a sense it is passed on to the reader who has now become the moderator of science/reason/law herself. The result of the author's death is not non-knowledge but a kind of 'liberated' or

[137] Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, 1977, p. 147
[138] *Ibid*., p. 145

'revolutionary' knowledge. On the contrary, the complete absence of authority that inner experience is, leads not to a shift of power from the writer to the reader, but to a merger of the two in a community whose meaning is that of non-meaning.

As a conclusion to this approach of *Inner Experience,* I would like to turn to Hollier's statement that *Inner Experience* is an 'autotransgressive book'.[139] This applies to the book's textual characteristics as well as its content, which, as this chapter suggests, are so closely connected that it is impossible to consider one without the other. The autotransgressive character of this book lies in the fact that, its content is found not in what is actually written, but in what the written text forces the reader to see; and that is situated beyond the text. Hollier suggests that the way *Inner Experience* is written 'precludes our reading this book in any way other than in the space of textual heterogeneity outside the book'.[140] Through the pages of the book that is supposed to be *on* inner experience, on the loss of the self in non-knowledge, the dimensions of the book itself are lost: its writing, informed by its reading, constitutes a combination of its content and its methodology that leads to the transgression of its own nature. The book is transgressed as book, in so far as it is not a book *on* experience, but, ultimately, *is* experience itself.

[139] Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 45
[140] *Ibid*.

Chapter Three: Eroticism

Eroticism is for Bataille a major preoccupation, not only as a subject on its own terms but also as a constant reference throughout most of his theoretical and fictional work. As a central theme in his corpus, it illuminates fundamental concepts such as transgression, community and sacrifice, but taken as the sole subject and focus of a study, as with *Eroticism,* published in 1957, Bataille is presented with a very specific issue: that of methodology. For Bataille, eroticism is first and foremost a methodological problem, in that the topic itself profoundly affects the way the book is written. Writing the erotic is a challenge to writing itself. Eroticism must be explored from the inside; for Bataille this is the only possible way for its deciphering and justification, and yet the product of this exploration is inevitably a study, a project. A balance needs to be maintained between the exteriority of the study he has undertaken to complete, and the interiority or inner experience that the subject of this book demands. The structure of *Eroticism,* its division into two separate parts and even the selection of the essays that form the latter, with the position of the preface to *Madame Edwarda* at the very end, all attest to this methodological difficulty and even to a possible solution: fiction has the final say in the analysis of the erotic. Writing the erotic from the inside is only possible with the aid of the language of fiction.

In order for this methodological problem to become clear, the nature of eroticism as Bataille perceived it has to be clarified as well. This is necessary as, especially in this book, the theme and the way in which it is presented are part of

the same problematic. Eroticism is an issue that has to be addressed precisely because of its impossibility to be addressed. Unlike Bataille's other theoretical works, and indeed, unlike any other major work on the erotic, here it is treated in a way that reveals its paradoxical nature: 'writing about eroticism', is a phrase that reveals both the question and the obstacles that are inherent in it. This *about* is what limits any attempt for a 'proper' evaluation of the erotic as it necessarily raises a wall between what is studied and what is actually written, as well as the mode in which it is written. What makes Bataille's study important is precisely this: he is not 'writing *about* eroticism', but rather 'writing eroticism', as experience. If what is at stake is not letting the external point of view obscure, or objectify, or, in Bataille's language utilise the erotic, then the only solution is the quest for a way of writing not *about* it, but *within* it.

In this chapter I aim to explore the double nature of eroticism both as an independent subject of study and also as a methodological problem inherent in this very subject. In order for this to become evident, the specific ways in which the erotic is treated have to become clear: its connection to humanity, to the self and to the communication with the other, as well as its nature as excess, as something that escapes any definition found in our world, and therefore in the act of writing as well. A solution to the apparent impasse is fiction as the manifestation of eroticism not as theorising, but through something that resembles sacrifice; eroticism as the inner experience that it actually is.

One of the reasons that Bataille as a writer is celebrated is his contribution to the field of the erotic. Eroticism is inextricably bound with sexuality, which is the theme that gave him the reputation of an avant garde pornographer and even pervert among the French intellectuals. On the back cover of the English edition of

Eroticism by Marion Boyars (2006), one reads: 'a librarian, pornographer and a devout Catholic, he later came to regard the brothels of Paris as his true "churches"'. This quote is important because it defines the nature of Bataille's work, especially in relation to this particular book, which is itself titled 'Eroticism'. However, eroticism and sexuality are not one and the same, at least not in the common sense of the two words. Bataille devotes his book in clearing up the two notions, and for that he has chosen to divide it in two parts, the first one consisting of his thoughts related to anthropological, sociological elements, and the second of a kind of commentary on significant independent studies. On the second part, the last chapter is his own preface to his novel *Madame Edwarda,* which brings the fictional point of view to the study on the subject of eroticism. As he states at the foreword of the book, his sole intention was to present a coherent whole, as eroticism, although discussed at length, has always been the subject of scientific research, in other words, was always studied from the outside and was, therefore, inevitably missing the one thing that defines it: its inner experience.

A simple question has to be asked then: *what is eroticism?* The reason why this question is never asked (and answered) in such a straightforward way is that eroticism brings together man's whole existence in a way that can never really be 'thought of'. In other words, man's passing through the world, from his birth until his death, is based on the fact that his rationality will not let him be consumed by the forces and urges that take him beyond himself. This condition excludes anything that can be 'thought of', it is an experience revealed only at the limit. Eroticism has the privilege of being such an experience; one that takes man at and to the limit, where he can become a being other than the thinking being, where he is no longer devoted to work and where his concern for the future disappears.

Eroticism, therefore, must be thought of not only in terms of sexuality, not only as a basic or impulsive human activity, but as the part of humanity that actually defines humanity. If man is the animal that has denied the violence of nature for the sake of his own growth through the calmness of rationality, eroticism is what brings him in touch with this initial denial. The paradox is that man, the working, thinking being, completes himself in a condition that is defined by his *not* working, *not* thinking. This is what is presented as a major problem for Bataille, who endeavours to clarify this experience as a working, thinking being, as a writer; perhaps this is why, at the last chapter of his book, he chooses to present the impact of fiction on eroticism, of a language that is able to escape partly the rules of utility, so incompatible with the conditions of an inner experience.

In the foreword of the book, at the very first sentences, Bataille states:

> The human spirit is prey to the most astounding impulses. Man goes constantly in fear of himself […]. The cohesion of the human spirit whose potentialities range from the ascetic to the voluptuous may nevertheless be sought. The point of view I adopt is one that reveals the coordination of those potentialities.[141]

What is at stake in eroticism is the human spirit and its cohesion. What terrifies man is what he needs to face at all costs, if he is to stop misunderstanding his own nature. Here lies the first indication that eroticism is not merely a function of the human animal but something related to his 'spirit', that can provide the step that completes man, bringing forth the element of his nature that he constantly misunderstands. In the introduction, Bataille provides the first definition, or something like a definition, of eroticism: 'Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to

[141] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p.7

life up to the point of death. Strictly speaking, this is not a definition, but I think the formula gives the meaning of eroticism better than any other'.[142] Here, eroticism is described as a psychological quest which is independent of its goal, that is, reproduction, unlike the sexual activity of animals. However, what reproduction reveals is the connection of eroticism to death. Reproduction clearly exhibits that we are discontinuous beings that are born and die alone, our lives and deaths being distinctly separate by an unbridgeable gulf. We cannot communicate, understand the gulf that lies between us, but we can experience its 'dizziness' together. In other words, eroticism brings life and death together in one movement, it offers to the discontinuous beings that we are, a taste of continuity; it introduces death to life, and life to death; it is assenting to life up to the point of death.

Jean Baudrillard in his essay 'Death in Bataille' explores the connection of eroticism to death, and contrasts it to the Freudian interpretation of death and sexuality. While in Freud these two are opposing notions, Bataille treats them as being 'in the same cycle, in the same cyclical *revolution* of continuity'.[143] Death and sexuality as part of the same current, cannot be defined by any economy. Their revolutionary character escapes Freud's linearity, as it opens up a state of fusion and dissolution into a space where discontinuity is the rule, not in a reciprocal relation of life and death but in the cycle of excessive festivity. This is why 'what Freud missed was not seeing the curvature of life in death, he missed its vertigo and its excess, its reversal of the entire economy of life. […] Freud stated life's final

[142] *Ibid*., p. 11

[143] Jean Baudrillard, 'Death in Bataille', in *Bataille: A Critical Reader,* ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell, 1998, p. 140

economy under the sign of repetition and missed its paroxysm'.[144] Bataille's mingling of sexuality and death allows for the vertigo, or dizziness of death to reveal itself, and at the same time to question man's own discontinuity, his own being. Vertigo signifies man's yearning for continuity, as it opens up the space for communication. Its common experience is the bringing of continuity into discontinuity, or of death to life, in so far as eroticism is at play.

Man's discontinuity, isolation and fundamental contrast to animals that live and die 'lost in a global animality […] like the waves of the sea', as Bataille puts it in another instance,[145] is the one thing responsible for eroticism. Eroticism exists because we are human beings, because of our condition; it is not a given 'natural' fact, like animal sexuality is; it is the outcome of man's contrast to, or denial of animality. 'We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. […] This nostalgia is responsible for the three forms of eroticism in man'.[146] Eroticism then is born out of the yearning to return to the continuity that is lost, at the moment when man became a man. The process from animality to humanity is this: the Bataillean animal denies its animality, denies nature and the violence inherent in her, and is no longer an animal. He becomes a man. This event breaks the continuity in which the animal exists like a wave among waves and becomes the discontinuous being in the temporal universe of humanity: man no longer lives in each moment, in the present, but he works, he devotes his life to utility and to the concern for the future. He is now the being who is conscious of his discontinuity, he can only call himself a man in this precise discontinuity; but he is also conscious

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[144] *Ibid*., p. 141
[145] Georges Bataille, 'Hegel, Death and Sacrifice', in *Yale French Studies*, No. 78, *On Bataille*, p. 15
[146] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 15

of the continuity he denied. He recognises this continuity in the lives of animals, which he initially worships like gods that possess what he cannot regain. The animal that is now man is able to yearn for what is lost. Yearning is a human characteristic, born at the same time as man. The animal cannot yearn, cannot search for continuity, it is already lost in it. Eroticism is born at the same time that man is born. This is why human sexual activity is fundamental in eroticism, not for its own sake, but for its ability to reveal the truth of eroticism. This truth is bound with the very birth of man.

Bataille sketches in his introduction the basic truth of eroticism, the quest for continuity only possible by a being that is outside it. This being that yearns for lost continuity yearns, in other words, for the denial of its own humanity. I want to pursue the logic of this through the concept of *double negation*. This is the process through which Bataille presents the human condition: in the first stage the Bataillean animal negates its animality and becomes man, the discontinuous being belonging now to the world defined by utility. In the second stage, this same being negates his current nature once more, this time as an attempt to return to what was initially denied. This second negation can only be performed by this being, through and because of its discontinuity. In eroticism continuity is achieved, but not as a return to animality. Man negates his nature as man, humanity being a precondition and requirement for eroticism. From this perspective, eroticism is nothing other than transgression, breaking the rules, and furthermore, breaking the rules that man himself forced upon himself in order to be man. In other words, man is able to break the rules only because he himself made the decision to force them upon himself in the first place. He was born simultaneously with the birth of these rules. Taboos on his animality were set to separate him from nature's continuity and place him into society's discontinuity:

> Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals. […] What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain.[147]

This means that man cannot fully escape his current condition, the one that he himself created by imposing upon himself the fundamental prohibitions on his animal nature. This first negation is complete in the sense that what was denied, was denied forever and irreversibly. What man achieves in his second negation as a human being is not a return but a calculated denial, the only denial possible by the thinking creature that he is. Continuity can be experienced only in so far as his world can sustain it. It cannot be complete, it cannot be 'animal'- that would mean his death. But man needs to be alive in order to experience; to experience death without dying is what man yearns for, and this is what human eroticism can achieve: 'Eroticism opens the way to death. Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives. Without doing violence to our inner selves, are we able to bear a negation that carries us to the farthest bounds of possibility?'.[148]

This suggests the need to focus on violence as a key aspect of eroticism. Violence, and more specifically violence to our inner selves is the key to eroticism as transgression. To begin with, violence is what taboos were set to eliminate in the first place. As the principle of nature it exists not only in her, but in man also, as her inseparable part. When he denied nature, man denied the violence that is the driving force within him. Therefore, the violation of the taboo is a return to violence. Transgression can only be violent, in accordance with the thing it was set

[147] *Ibid*., p. 19
[148] *Ibid*., p. 24

to prohibit. Bataille describes inner experience as 'the instant when bursting out of the chrysalis he feels that he is tearing himself, not tearing something outside that resists him'.[149] The metaphor of the chrysalis which I want to focus on here, illuminates the experience of transgression as a process that occurs in a profoundly personal manner. In the violence of transgression man tears himself, his own limits and not some external obstacle. The chrysalis becomes a different creature by transforming itself; it is still 'itself' but modified, more advanced perhaps. Man also, tearing his own self by overcoming his limits does not enter an external territory, he does not transcend his being, but through his own being becomes something different, more advanced. By doing violence to our inner selves we open up the possibility of a transformed self, like the creature that the chrysalis becomes by bursting out of its own confinement. This notion of the self and its limits is extremely important in eroticism. At its core, this is what it achieves: a transformation of one's self.

Early in part one of the book, Bataille again offers something like a definition of eroticism: 'Human eroticism differs from animal sexuality precisely in this, that it calls inner life into play. In human consciousness eroticism is that within man which calls his being in question'.[150] Man's whole being is at stake in eroticism, as he loses himself in it. His selfhood, his discontinuity is questioned. Eroticism is a deeply personal experience, however, in the sexual act a complex relationship emerges between the beings involved. Taking the couple in sexuality, we have two beings losing themselves. Both are questioning themselves, negating their own limits, in what Bataille calls 'the crisis of existence'. In the crisis, super-abundance, or plethora, inevitably leads to death, more evidently in the realm of asexual

[149] *Ibid*., p. 39
[150] *Ibid*., p. 29

reproduction, less so in sexual reproduction. Sexual reproduction is not immediately followed by death, but in the long run, it will be its consequence. In any case, in sexuality, the transition from discontinuity to continuity is at stake. The discontinuity that defines human beings and allows them to perceive themselves in their world is under attack, with the prospect of continuity. The relation that is formed in sexuality is described in this paragraph, which is worth quoting at length:

> With sexuality particularly a sense of the existence of others beyond the self-feeling suggests a possible continuity as opposed to the original discontinuity. [...] Each being contributes to the self-negation of the other, yet the negation is not by any means a recognition of the other as a partner. [...] There is no real union; two individuals in the grip of violence brought together by the preordained reflexes of sexual intercourse share in a state of crisis in which both are beside themselves. Both creatures are simultaneously open to continuity.[151]

In the couple, both beings are open to continuity, in other words, they both experience the gulf that separates them. This is the closest they can get to each other as discontinuous beings, without them disappearing into death. They both experience the dizziness of death, and this is their union. They unite in the void that opens up when each of them overcomes their limits. When the couple unites in eroticism, this fusion does not imply the emergence of a different, transcendent being, created by the combination of the two. The couple is not an entity but the meeting of two beings that are still separate, still defined by their discontinuity. The difference is that they manage to connect because of the gulf that separates

[151] *Ibid*., pp. 102, 103

them. They are both open to this gulf and not to each other. The tearing of the self of one meets the tearing of the self of the other, in their violence, and they both take part in the possibility of continuity.

In search of continuity the self is lost, and what is found is a state of ecstasy, of a beyond the self. In this experience, what is required is the breaking of the limit, or transgression. Bataille thus, equates man's inner life with his religious life. Religious sacrifice and eroticism are so closely related to each other precisely because of the transgression fundamental in both. Sacrifice as the cornerstone of every religion signifies the destruction of profane life, and the appearance of the sacred. Eroticism and religion are in search of the same thing: continuity.

> The act of violence that deprives the creature of its limited particularity and bestows on it the limitless, infinite nature of sacred things is with its profound logic an intentional one. It is intentional like the act of the man who lays bare, desires and wants to penetrate his victim. The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less that the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim.[152]

In religious sacrifice the participants lose themselves as they experience the scarification or 'making sacred' of the victim. The intentionality of the act is crucial for the experience. Transgression here exists in a double form: firstly, the act committed is generally forbidden. The actual killing of the victim is only allowed as part of the religious cult, in this particular occasion, so different from the ordinary life of the participants. Through this transgression that we can call 'external', another one takes place, an 'internal' transgression. The taboo against killing is deliberately broken in a public, ceremonial way, and this external transgression

[152] *Ibid*., p. 90

gives rise to the personal experience that each of the participants lives. This is their inner experience, or their opening up to continuity. If we imagine a group of people, the members of a tribe gathered to perform a sacrifice, we can break down the ceremony in these two stages: the intentional killing of the creature, and the subsequent 'killing' of each of the members' own limits. The ceremony is the external transgression of the tribe's taboo, the one that defines them as such and that sustains their discontinuity; the result, or consequence, or even aim of the sacrifice is the internal transgression of the self, which reveals the unity of the participants, not in an entity that combines them but in their separateness. This separateness is what also allows for their opening up to each other, in their common participation to the experience. In other words, their inner experience reveals in each of them their possibility of continuity.

Just as 'the whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives',[153] in religious sacrifice too, the individuality, or discontinuity of each member is dissolved. In eroticism, it is not the taboo against killing that is transgressed, but the equally fundamental taboo against sexuality in general. If we were to follow the logic of the two forms of transgression in eroticism, we could say for the sake of analogy that here, the sexual act, the impulse that we share with animals, reproductive or not, is representative of the external transgression that leads to the internal loss of the self and the mutual participation in the continuity that opens up between the couple. The sexual act, the penetrative act of the man inside the woman in Bataille's schema, is analogous to the act of killing of the sacrificial victim, or the transgression of the taboo against killing.

[153] *Ibid*., p. 17

The question that I want to draw out here, concerns the nature of the communication that emerges in both 'sacrifices'. To focus on this question may enable us to specify the difference, if there is one, between the couple and community, or the community of the couple and the community 'par excellence'. A first step towards this can be found in the final chapters of the first part of *Eroticism*, devoted to the object of desire (prostitution) and beauty. Here Bataille contrasts the orgy with eroticism: the former, he says, is necessarily disappointing, as the loss of the participants' self occurs in mingled confusion, where the individuality of each of them is denied.[154] On the contrary:

> Eroticism which is fusion, which shifts interest away from and beyond the person and its limits, is nevertheless expressed by an object. We are faced with the paradox of an object which implies the abolition of the limits of all objects, of an *erotic object*.[155]

The erotic object is what paves the way for eroticism, it is, in this instance, the beautiful woman that man desires. In both the orgy and eroticism, fusion is what is sought, in the sense that the discontinuous, individual beings cease to be discontinuous, and all identity is lost. This occurs in both cases, the determining factor of their difference being the object of desire. Eroticism is not disappointing, it does not end in mingled confusion but in something else. Here the initial individuality is marked by the existence of the object, and thus allows for the mutual recognition of the couple as they are lost together beyond themselves. Eroticism reveals the self before death in a way that is clear and undeniable; perhaps as clear as it can possibly be, at the limit, at the same time in and out of

[154] *Ibid*., p. 129
[155] *Ibid.,* pp. 129, 130

oneself. Recognition of the other, even as an object, is the key to a move 'beyond the self'.

Women, for Bataille, are the objects of desire par excellence, because of their ability to be passive, to allow themselves to be desired. Unlike the orgy, eroticism is in need of a dual relationship, of the couple, and more specifically, for Bataille, the male and female couple. If the impersonal orgy is 'disappointing', then the couple embodied by the man and woman in love is presented as a more complete form of eroticism. An initial identity is required, even though the result is a loss of identity. The paradox of the object that abolishes all objects is also the paradox of the gendered couple that abolishes all difference, including gender difference. Patrick ffrench in his study *After Bataille, Sacrifice, Exposure, Community,* explores the nature of the sacrificial erotic subject, and the implications that a reading of sacrifice as fantasy that Jean-Luc Nancy suggests might have. Such a reading necessarily constrains sacrifice within the limits of representation where the erotic object (the woman) is always for the subject (the man) a representation of loss and exposure. ffrench argues that the woman as the erotic object is offered, following the logic of the gift, to the man who is the subject of vision: 'the erotic object is sacrificial, equivalent to the cut, because it is a visual shock, a tear in a surface'.[156] The gendered subject-object relationship through this perspective, is not defined by the definitions of a heterosexual gender based perception: 'if female nudity is a *sign*, rather than an *index,* then it is linked only contingently to the transgressive rupture it offers or signals, and signifies according to a play of meaning which is culturally and historically conditioned'.[157] The erotic object is historically defined, it belongs to the history of eroticism and

[156] ffrench, *After Bataille*, p. 155
[157] *Ibid*.

transgression and does not allow for fixed representational scenes. This allows for its paradoxical nature to become apparent, when it undoes in the erotic fusion not a specific archaic fantasy forever fixed in the gendered relationship of man and woman, but the historical factors that define it. The object of eroticism is offered through determining factors such as history, society and culture, only to be transformed into the undeterminable, to that which abolishes all difference.

The object of desire is presented in Bataille as something to be possessed instead of the actual desire. The human desire is always a desire for continuity, for death, but the prospect of death is at the same time the most terrifying, horrible possibility of all. Cheating, substituting for death the lived experience of death is what man can do.

> How sweet it is to remain in the grip of the desire to burst out without going the whole way, without taking the final step! How sweet it is to gaze long upon the object of our desire, to live on in our desire, instead of dying by going the whole way, by yielding to the excessive violence of desire! We know that possession of the object we are afire of is out of the question.[158]

We long for continuity but will not submit to it. This seems to be for Bataille the problem with which man is doomed to exist. The solution to this problem is not a definitive one, it never faces the problem straight on, but arrives in the roundabout way of eroticism, of transgression. 'Two things are inevitable; we cannot avoid dying nor can we avoid bursting through our barriers, and they are one and the same'.[159] Life from this perspective is a constant encounter with death, not only as

[158] Bataille, *Eroticism,* pp. 141, 142
[159] *Ibid*., p. 140

its consciousness, but as the inevitable, even compulsive strive towards a taste of its dizziness. To live is to die without dying; in other words, life is nothing without the roundabout satisfaction of the desire for death.

In eroticism this truth which is in the end nothing but the very truth of human existence finds its expression in the purest way. Eroticism is born out of the taboos that gave rise to humanity, and it is itself the denial of those taboos. The whole process of the birth of humanity is seen in its violent excess, bringing together in a single movement birth and death. Although the object of desire is not eroticism itself, it is nevertheless the passage towards it. Beauty is the essence of the object, what man desires to possess, in order to spoil it. Beauty is destroyed in eroticism in a manner that is equal to sacrifice: a beautiful woman is as detached from animality as possible, she is in other words as human as possible, and her humanity along with the taboos that define it is what is sacrificed, transgressed. The sexual act is always the destruction of beauty, of humanity, in an anguished process that reveals the ugliness of animality.

Among the desired objects, for Bataille primarily the beauty of women, the prostitute holds a cardinal position as the ultimate object: 'With prostitution, the prostitute was dedicated to a life of transgression. The sacred or forbidden aspect of sexual activity remained apparent in her, for her whole life was dedicated to violating the taboo'.[160] The prostitute is the incarnation, the living existence of transgression, and this is why she is the closest being to God. Her life is surrounded and always in touch with the sacred, in other words, she is the living promise of the possibility of continuity. The prostitute's 'objectivity' is determined by economic factors, but this economy is that of the gift, dedicated to the continuation

[160] *Ibid*., p. 133

of the qualities that define her sacredness. As ffrench suggests, 'prostitution, properly speaking, is the movement of offering, the proposition without the feint, but it retains the initial element of 'ornament' ('la parlure') in which the woman is signified as an erotic object'.[161] Her position as an object defines her very existence as the living incarnation of the logic of the gift, or the cycle of super abundance and unproductive expenditure. She is the abolition of all objectivity, but still, a fundamental differentiation is required.

Objectivity leads to fusion in the dual relationship of man and woman, as the orgy does in the impersonal frenzy. In both, continuity is the sole aim and outcome, but somehow the possession of the desired object in the dual relationship consists of the key that differentiates the two. The 'priority' of the couple is expressed in the fact that it is initiated by the individuality of the two beings. To die without dying, to live while dying, is to overcome the limits of ourselves. In inner experience, the being regains a sense of the self that is complete because it includes the part of the self that is not defined by discontinuity. Man finds himself in losing himself, and this paradoxical situation is profoundly personal. The existence of the other allows for the existence of the self, for the mutual recognition of both that becomes ultimately the mutual negation of both. Without the fundamental self-awareness, the fusion is incomplete because it does not lead to the whole image of man, but to a confused feeling of it. If man strives to find his completeness in continuity it is in a way that will allow him to get closer to his own death, his own negation. The mutual recognition of the two beings in sexuality brings forth their common recognition as beings losing themselves. Here, losing oneself is not so different from finding oneself, only what is found is situated

[161] ffrench, *After Bataille,* p. 157

in a domain so foreign to the one inside of which it is able to be defined, that loss is the only possible way of definition. Man destroys a woman's beauty, what makes her human, the sexual ritual being defined by the elements of difference between them, in order to be lost in the violence of an excess that is beyond any difference, any object. Both individuals in the sexual act recognise themselves as discontinuous beings open to the possibility of continuity, fused for a moment with the completeness of the universe.

The moment of orgasm, or 'little death', is precisely what this nickname implies. 'If love exists at all it is, like death, a swift movement of loss within us, quickly slipping into tragedy and stopping only with death. For the truth is that between death and the reeling, heady motion of the little death the distance is hardly noticeable'.[162] This is the moment when death merges with life, and a glimpse of continuity appears. 'The moment' implies also a position in temporality, although its nature as occurring beyond the self, necessarily escapes any timeframe. Losing oneself means losing everything that defines it, and most importantly knowledge. Measurements such as time and quantity seem unable to define a domain that leaves human knowledge outside. However, 'the moment' suggests that it does have a beginning and an end, something like a duration that in terms of ordinary life can be measured in seconds. At the moment of orgasm, time is experienced in a similar way with animals. It is the plain experience of the present without concern for the future. At its end however, with the return to the ordinary state of things, the fusion is dissolved, the couple is still a couple, but no longer connected by its mutual negation. In the orgy, the lack of a distinct object of desire does not allow for the a progress from individuality to fusion; its mingled

[162] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 239

confusion at the moment of transgression does not allow for it to end, with the broken rules returning to their former force, in an individuality that is enriched by the experience. On the contrary, the couple returns from the moment of orgasm as two distinct discontinuous beings, as they were before, but with their self-awareness 'enriched'. They deliberately transgress their boundaries, they lose for a moment themselves, and return from their inner experience with their individuality intact.

Bataille in the second volume of *The Accursed Share*, (The History of Eroticism*),* engages with the object of desire and the totality of the real. I would like, at this point, to turn to this text in order to attempt a more complete approach towards identifying the significance of eroticism. Here, eroticism is expressed in the embrace of the lovers, which has the ability to fuse the objective with the subjective, to reveal in other words, a world that is new, a world without objects. In the world of the intellect, of discontinuity, the fundamental principle is utility: 'the mental process of abstraction never gets out of a cycle in which one thing is related to another, for which the first is useful; […] The scythe is there for the harvest, the harvest for food, the food for labor, the labor for the factory where scythes are made'.[163] This cycle of utility is what sustains this world which expresses nothing other than the everyday lives of human beings. Anything that lies outside of this cycle is not really a human world but something that cannot even be defined, for the necessary tools for definition are only to be found therein. The world of eroticism to which the world of utility is contrasted is described as 'sovereign totality', and is 'commensurate with the entire universe'.

[163] Bataille, *The Accursed Share II & III*, p. 112

In eroticism there is no need for justification in the chain of utility; totality exists as an end in itself. The desire for an object is the bridge to an objectless universe, and is ultimately, what makes this universe possible. Without the mutual desire of the lovers the world of eroticism would not be revealed. Bataille speaks of love, the universe, and totality. The couple here is the couple in love, and what they experience at the moment of orgasm is in accordance to the totality of the universe:

> In a word, the object of desire is the *universe,* in the form of she who in the embrace is its mirror, where we ourselves are reflected. At the most intense moment of fusion, the pure glaze of light, like a sudden flash, illuminates the immense field of possibility, on which these lovers are subtilized, annihilated, submissive in their excitement to a rarefaction which they desired.[164]

Through the object of desire, the relation between two beings, the lovers, is transformed from being objectively defined to being fused in a domain where objects completely disappear. The desired object, 'she', becomes the whole universe which also contains the subject that desired it in the first place. Objectivity lost, along with every possible difference. I will suggest that the meaning of this loss - of the object, of the subject, of the self - is first and foremost the complete inability to even define such terms. Subsequently, what Bataille calls the annihilation of the lovers in their embrace is the absolute lack of a definition of the two as they enter a domain where definition in traditional ways is not possible. It is even possible to say that the word 'annihilation' itself is inappropriate, as it describes the situation of the lovers from the viewpoint of utility. The lovers are

[164] *Ibid*., p. 116

indeed annihilated, but only because we perceive their situation as outsiders. However, the moment of fusion is for them the ultimate awareness. At the end of a passage whose writing style resembles that of fiction, Bataille writes: 'at this moment I no longer doubt that I am embracing the totality without which I was only *outside*: I reach orgasm'.[165] What the relationship of the lovers shows is that two distinct, discontinuous beings can have awareness of themselves even beyond themselves. The lovers know that they have lost themselves in a territory where awareness is no longer the awareness of the world of the intellect. They are conscious in a world where consciousness is not possible, highlighting in this way the paradox of eroticism.

If the lovers at the moment of orgasm communicate something, it is this: their own separateness, their own awareness of their being beyond themselves. In other words, their fusion is not one that allows them to become one, but on the contrary, that forces them to realise their complete and utter individuality. When the lover has no doubt of embracing totality, it is because of the beloved, it is through her, but not 'with her' that he does so. 'But the embrace restores us, not to nature […] but rather to the totality in which man has his share by *losing himself.* For an embrace is not just a fall into the animal muck, but the anticipation of death, and of the putrefaction that follows it'.[166] His death is his own and never hers.

The union of the lovers appears to be something like a complete entity. When Bataille states that 'what the object offers to the subject who loves it is to open itself to the universe and to no longer differentiate itself from the

[165] *Ibid*., p. 118
[166] *Ibid*., p. 119

universe',[167] a closed group is implied, one that is consistent on its own. The lover is the universe for the beloved and vice versa, and the coincidence of their desires is allowing for the emergence of this closed reality. While in *The Accursed Share* the lovers' union is referred to as 'total' and as 'the universe', in the essay 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', it is described as the 'world of lovers': 'The world of lovers is no less *true* than that of politics. It even absorbs the totality of life, which politics cannot do'.[168] And further down, 'even though love by itself constitutes a world, it leaves intact everything that surrounds it'.[169] The lovers form a distinct world, and one that is indifferent to everything that exists outside of the bedroom where they are locked. Their fusion and consistency is also described with the same rigour and with similar characteristics in Bataille's novel *Story of the Eye*:

> And it struck me that death was the sole outcome of my erection, and if Simone and I were killed, then the universe of our unbearable personal vision was certain to be replaced by the pure stars, fully unrelated to any external gazes and realizing in a cold state, without human delays or detours, something that strikes me as the goal of my sexual licentiousness: a geometric incandescence (among other things, the coinciding point of life and death, being and nothingness), perfectly fulgurating.[170]

This passage offers an example taken from a fictional couple, that of the protagonist and Simone, that includes every aspect of the couple in eroticism. Their physical position in the midst of nature (the scene occurs while they are cycling, naked in the windy, starry night) is perfectly compatible with their inner

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[167] *Ibid*., p. 161
[168] Bataille, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' in *Visions of Excess*, p. 229
[169] *Ibid*., p. 232
[170] Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* Penguin Modern Classics, 2001, p. 30

situation described in the passage. The protagonist finds himself in complete accordance of his own being with the universe, in a movement that is the same as death. In other words, his living self has become the same thing as his dying self, being and nothingness coinciding at the moment of his sexual arousal. Being in complete accordance with the universe, all things human disappear. Simone, the object of his desire is also mingled in this inner experience, having abolished, along with every object belonging to the world of human detours, herself as an object as well.

This experience that is felt so intensely by the protagonist, is 'realized in a cold state'. Being in a state of fusion, not able to separate himself from the totality of the universe, he is nevertheless aware of his being at the limit. The protagonist finds himself in losing himself. Simone, the other part of the relationship, is there, but what he discovers in their fusion is not her existence but his own. However dual this experience appears to be, and it definitely is, its outcome touches the depths of the human existence in a way that is deeply personal. Eroticism is for the couple in love the sign and product of their union, but its truth is the unveiling of being in solitude and silence. In their communion, the lovers begin with losing themselves in each other, only to end up losing themselves again in the totality of the universe.; but this loss is also the discovery of a new kind of being that can only be revealed at the limit. The community of lovers is here clearly one that reveals at its moment of ecstasy not the duality of its initial form, but on the contrary, the personal state of each of its members.

In contrast to the couple, we find at the opposite end the problem of the possibility of a community in eroticism. An approach towards a solution to this problem is the consideration of the discursive implications inherent in eroticism.

Once again, eroticism is considered as a theme that has to be approached not only in relation to its content, but also in terms of its methodology. ffrench offers a reading of *Madame Edwarda* that reveals the positioning of history in connection to eroticism in Bataille's fiction in contrast to its treatment as an equivalent to the archaic sacrificial ritual. *Madame Edwarda,* staged on a specific spatial and temporal context does not allow for a kind of ahistorical interpretation that would suggest the repetition of a primal sacrificial/erotic scene. 'The historical dialectic, the series of negations, does not give rise to the completion of history, since there is an unavowable (*inavouable)* or irreducible *(irréductible)* element which remains and which takes different routes according to its historical context'.[171] This 'unavowable' is what remains in Bataille's eroticism, or what escapes any definition in language:

> Transgression passes from the domain of the law and its symbols to the infinite space of language and its restriction in discourses. If the play of eroticism depends largely on the linguistic recourse to 'les mots orduriers' [obscene words], this itself suggests that, for Bataille, eroticism is a matter of words.[172]

This suggests not only that eroticism is presented as a problem in language, in the way humans communicate in their own reality, but also that in its essence, it has to be expressed at the same time inside language and outside of it. The unavowable implies that eroticism cannot ever be 'spoken of'. Although eroticism resides in language, it still consists of something that simultaneously escapes it, like a secret that even though it is uttered, its secret character nevertheless remains.

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[171] ffrench, *After Bataille,* p. 161
[172] *Ibid*., pp. 161, 162

Jean-Luc Nancy in his work *The Inoperative Community* argues for the impossibility of absolute immanence in community, as that would mean its very suppression. Absolute immanence is equal to death and consequently, to the disappearance of community. The meaning of community therefore, is not the common participation in immanence but rather its contrary: it is communication as the exposure of the community's impossibility, or the sharing and com-pearance of finitude:

> In place of such a communion, there is communication. Which is to say, in very precise terms, that finitude itself *is* nothing; it is neither a ground, nor an essence, nor a substance. But it appears, it presents itself, it exposes itself, and thus it *exists* as communication. […] [F]initude *co-appears* or *compears (com-parait)* and it can only *compear.*[173]

Communication for Nancy is exposure to an outside. The sharing of finitude is the exposure to another finitude, which is to say that this outside is not a ground or place but the meeting of two separate singularities. There is no real bond between them, what 'connects' them is precisely the thing that stands between them: it is 'the appearance of the *between* as such: you *and* I (between us) – a formula in which *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition'.[174]

Community is the exposition of finitude, and the 'world of lovers' is not exempt from this rule. This means that for Nancy, the lovers' bond, their exposure, occurs to each other always already within their society. What love communicates in them and through them is their own limits towards each other, but already limited by the social itself: 'For Bataille, community was first and finally the

[173] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 28
[174] *Ibid*., p. 29

community of lovers. […] Bataille's celebration of lovers, or what one might call his passion for lovers, reveals the inaccessible character both of their own community, one shared not by one couple, but by all couples and all the love in society'.[175] For Nancy, Bataille's lovers are caught up in the sphere of the private, trapped in their own ecstasy, and thus not allowing for a community to be thought of outside of their own limitations. As ffrench suggests: 'the consummation and exposure of love is thus the *internal* limit of society, rather than its external limit or an external, separate 'world'.[176] However, through Blanchot's response to Nancy's argument in *The Unavowable Community,* the unique nature of eroticism as a 'secret' is illuminated, offering a way out of what Nancy calls the private sphere of the lovers. Blanchot arrives at the confirmation of the unavowable community through the reading of *The Malady of Death* by Marguerite Duras:

> Here is the room, the closed space open to nature and closed to other humans where, during an indefinite time reckoned in nights – though no night may come to an end – two beings try to unite only to live (and in a certain way to celebrate) the failure that constitutes the truth of what would be their perfect union, the *lie* of that union which always takes place by not taking place. Do they, is spite of all that, form some kind of *community*? It is rather *because* of that that they form a community.[177]

The unavowable is the secret that escapes language, but does so through language: it speaks of the unspeakable, through the exposure not of one subject to another, or of the male subject to the female object, but to impossibility itself: 'Blanchot thus reasserts a Bataillean insistence on the impossibility of love and on love as an

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[175] *Ibid*., p. 36
[176] ffrench, *After Bataille,* p. 178
[177] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community,* Station Hill Press, 1988, p. 49

experience of the impossible, transgressive of the relation between subject and object, as against Nancy's benign poetics of the touch'.[178] The secret of the impossibility of love escapes the sphere of the private, it even escapes the notion of community in the sense that it anticipates its appearance ('it is rather *because* of that that they form a community'). In the indefinable, or the unsayable that still manages to be said *as* the unsayable, community is able to be formed.

Blanchot's choice of Duras' novel as the basis for his response to Nancy's *Inoperative Community* and the presentation of his own *Unavowanle Community*, can be seen as the answer that fiction offers to the specific problem of writing the impossible. Bataille's methodological problem of writing eroticism is taken up by Blanchot as well, and it is approached via the means of fiction: *The Malady of Death* is a work of fiction, and it is also, as ffrench points out, a text that is 'pursuing the legacy opened up by *Madame Edwarda*'.[179] Blanchot finds the way to 'theorise' the impossible via the analysis of fiction, of a novel that like *Madame Edwarda* is in itself, without any commentary other than the *récit,* the presentation of eroticism from the viewpoint of eroticism. To the problem of how to write the erotic from the inside, the answer is: via its own language; but if the language of the erotic is that of a secret, of a silence that must nevertheless be heard, language must find a way through its own bending, its own manipulation.

Bataille himself chooses to end his book on eroticism with his preface to *Madame Edwarda*. What is important here is not only its position at the very end, serving as something similar to an epilogue, but also its following the chapter titled 'Sanctity, Eroticism and Solitude'. This chapter consists of a lecture that Bataille

[178] ffrench, *After Bataille,* p. 179
[179] *Ibid*., p. 171

gave in 1955, and what is of interest here is the last paragraph that seems to almost nullify the entire purpose of a lecture. Bataille says:

> I have cautioned you about language. I must therefore caution you at the same time against my own words. Not that I want to end upon a note of farce, but I have been trying to talk a language that equals zero, a language equivalent to nothing at all, a language that returns to silence. […] From this point anything that does not take us out of the world […] would betray my purpose. [180]

What Bataille has to say, what he aims to communicate is nothing other than the incommunicable; and that, is placed outside of the world where, naturally, language is insufficient. Eroticism is silence, or non-language. The preface to *Madame Edwarda*, read in the context of the book on eroticism, serves as a kind of 'different voice', which stands out among the theoretical writing of the rest. To begin with, the heroine, Madame Edwarda, is a prostitute and she is also God. She is the living incarnation of transgression, her life is devoted to the violation of the taboo. This short novel, this 'little book' as Bataille calls it, contains in its pages the truth of eroticism. What Bataille is at pains to explain in the theoretical part of his book, he manages to express in the few pages of *Madame Edwarda*. What is striking is that Bataille himself seems to be amazed by the importance of these pages, as if by reading it again he realised that they contain something he wanted to include in his study but could not find the way to do so.

> Let us be clear on this point. Pierre Angelique is careful to explain it. We know nothing and we are in the depths of darkness. But at least we can see what it is that deceives us, what it is that hinders us from knowing our

[180] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 264

> own distress, or more accurately from knowing that joy is the same thing as pain, the same thing as death.[181]

This novel, as part of a study on eroticism brings the fictional point of view to the theme of eroticism, and it does so in a complete way: not only the tale and its characters are fictional, but its author too. Bataille refers to the author of 'this little book' as Pierre Angelique, he treats it in every way as something foreign to his own work. Of course, the preface was not written with the purpose of being included in a study on eroticism, but in this context, its striking contrast to the rest of the book is extremely helpful for illuminating the subject:

> That is the significance and the enormity of this insensate little book: the story brings in God himself with all his attributes; yet this God is a whore exactly like all other whores. But what mysticism cannot put into words (it fails at the moment of utterance), eroticism says; God is nothing if he is not a transcendence of God in every direction;[182]

What Bataille cannot put into words, Pierre Angelique can. The word 'God' surpasses all words, it escapes every utterance, and yet it manages to be expressed in the fictional world of *Madame Edwarda*, without having to be explained: 'The secret is thus posed as an irreducible enigma at the limit of discourse, this limit being proposed in the word 'Dieu', which exists in language as that which destroys language and opens it up to […] nothing'.[183] This is the power of Bataille's fiction: his words provide not their definition but their essence. As thought becomes nothing, knowledge disappears, and writing as a task cannot fulfil the purpose it was set out to accomplish. Bataille struggles with this paradox throughout his

[181] *Ibid*., p. 266
[182] *Ibid*., p. 269
[183] ffrench, *After Bataille,* p. 163

work, where theory seems always to be missing something. His fiction is not only a genre that allows him to explore different possibilities and perspectives, but it also complements the theory. There, language is able to offer a way through to excess, to what Bataille wants to communicate. However, the problem remains, and it is clearly illustrated in a long footnote of the preface to *Madame Edwarda*:

> Excess is by very definition the factor that sets being beyond the limits of definition. […] (I too am being articulate at this moment, but in the process of speaking I do not forget that not only is the word destined eventually to elude my control, it eludes it as I speak. […] I do not dispute the factor of conscious awareness without which I should not be writing, but the hand that writes is dying and through its death in store evades the limits accepted as it writes (accepted by the writing hand, rejected by the dying hand).[184]

The hand that dies is the one responsible for writing, precisely because the very thing it writes is its death. One cannot write about the thing that escapes definition if one is not placed in the position of that very thing. Writing (about) excess is still a task, but of a different kind, in that its requirement is to escape at all costs being a task. As Jean-Michel Besnier suggests, Bataille is not an intellectual; he is an *emotive* intellectual in that, unlike him, the former 'lies if he takes up his pen in the service of a cause imposed on him from the outside. […] Writing, like personal involvement in history appears as "the effect of a passion, of an unquenched desire" – never as the product of a reasoned choice'.[185] Bataille's writing is a response to his passion and desire for writing, and for that he must only write

[184] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 268

[185] Jean-Michel Besnier, 'Bataille, the Emotive Intellectual', in *Bataille, Writing the Sacred,* ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill, Routledge, 1995, p. 16

from the position of the inside. The dying hand is in the grip of excess and can do nothing other than reject the conscious awareness of the writer. As we have seen in the first chapter of this thesis, Bataille, in the foreword to another fictional work, *Blue of Noon,* sets the question of writing excess to himself and to the reader: 'how can we linger over books to which their authors have manifestly not been *driven*?'.[186] The dying hand is the one that is driven to write, not by what in Bataille's terms can be called utility, but by the 'fury' that makes excess manifest in fiction.

The question that needs to be asked at this point is the possibility of difference between the author of *Eroticism* and the author of *Madame Edwarda.* Another formulation of this question would be: does the hand that writes belong to the author of *Eroticism*, while the hand that dies to the author of *Madame Edwarda*? In both works, the theme is the same; it is the meaning of eroticism. But the work of fiction is the direct product of excess, in other words, it is itself the product of the very thing it is set to illustrate. Its importance, besides the fact that it is able to depict eroticism and all of its attributes, lies also in its unique nature as the product of the dying hand; but these two factors are inseparable, the one being a precondition for the other. The work of theory lacks this quality; the study of eroticism is, as Bataille states in his foreword, an attempt to bring all the different aspects of eroticism together, considering it as a whole. He is at all times suspicious of views that fall under the category of 'science' that can only look at eroticism from the outside, but his own voice too is condemned to insufficiency when faced with the immediacy of the experience he aims to describe. Fiction, on the other hand, has the advantage of offering the experience to the reader not in a

[186] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 127

roundabout way, but as straightforwardly as a written piece can: in novels, '[w]ithout too much personal discomfort we experience the feeling of losing or of being in danger that somebody else's adventures supply'.[187] Fiction is analogous to sacrifice in that they both offer to the reader/participant the experience of being part of something that is not directly happening to them. The reader is not actually living what the protagonist is, but she nevertheless lives the latter's experience. Likewise, the participants in sacrifice are not themselves sacrificed, but what they experience is analogous to the loss of discontinuity that the victim actually goes through. Furthermore, the whole aim of sacrifice is not for the victim to enter continuity, as the apparent ceremony suggests. The victim is sacrificed for the sake of the spectators, for their experience. We could say that the novel too is a response to the need for this 'sideways' experience.

Fiction in Bataille's case, and especially on the subject of eroticism, completes theory. It is the lived experience of his theory, via a language that can utter what escapes definition. The reader experiences what the protagonist actually lives, and also, on a different level, she responds to the fury by which the author was driven to write. Fiction, therefore, provides an answer to the methodological problem of language's insufficiency and 'the dying hand' is the only one able to fully grasp the content of erotic excess, because of its condition as dying: '[…] I retain a sovereign independence of which my death alone despoils me, proving how impossible it would have been to confine myself within the limits of an existence free of excess'.[188] To write eroticism is to write from the inside, in other words, to respond not only to the challenge of deciphering eroticism, but doing so while denying the traditional, available means for doing so. The theme of

[187] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 87
[188] *Ibid*., p. 268

eroticism and its writing respond to the same problem, that of methodology; and this problem is one that necessarily persists, for solving it would mean succumbing to the theoretical, 'scientific' way of expression, that can only treat the erotic from the viewpoint of science, that is, externally. With books written in excess, the problem is lessened, a solution is offered to the insufficiency of theory, but always in a way that reveals that the nature of the problem is part of its solution: eroticism being itself excess, cannot and should not be the subject of a scientific study.

In an interview for *Observateur* given in 1957 to Duras, Bataille gives a response to the question of writing, in a way that illuminates the problem of 'being driven' to writing a book:

> Q: When you are writing ---
>
> A: The greatest difficulty for me is not to write at random. What I mean is, it's hard for me to set myself a path while writing
>
> Q: Until you discover that in fact what you wrote was not at all random?
>
> A: No. Until I *cannot do anything but* make a book.[189]

The excessive quality of the writer that is driven to make a book is analogous to the excessive nature of eroticism, precisely because writing eroticism is writing its excess. Bataille cannot write excess if he does not, first and foremost, respond to it in a way that is situated *inside* it. The issue is not the 'randomness' of the content, but the need to write it; this is the case precisely because this need is what constitutes the book's content.

[189] Marguerite Duras, *Outside, Selected Writings,* Beacon Press, 1986, p.15

I would like to conclude this final chapter of the first part of my thesis by considering the postscript that Jean-Luc Nancy includes in his essay titled 'Shattered Love', and which I believe illustrates in a different, though parallel way, the problem that Bataille also faces in writing eroticism. Nancy at the end of this essay also seems to be struggling with the issue of defining something that escapes definition. The postscriptum is written in a way that is in complete contrast to the rest of essay, in a personal manner that resembles a letter addressed to himself as well as to someone else. This short piece, no longer than a page, crystallises the problematic of writing about love, and operates as the different voice that the preface to *Madame Edwarda* operates for Bataille. After his philosophical analysis, the question of love is still unanswered. The postscript begins with these sentences, which echo the investigations he was engaged with in the main essay:

> You wrote: "It might well be appropriate that a discourse on love be at the same time a communication of love, a letter, a missive, since love sends itself as much as it enunciates itself". But you didn't send this text to anyone. And you know very well that that doesn't mean that you sent it to everyone. One can't love everyone.[190]

And it ends with these:

> I should have sent everything, a thousand pages of love and not one word on it, to you alone. All the words of love from everyone. . . . It would have flown into pieces, barely thrown toward you, as it always flies into pieces as soon as it is sent. Yes, it's made for that.[191]

[190] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* p. 108
[191] *Ibid*., p. 109

Nancy's postscript appears as the expression of a doubt of his own analysis of love, but the matter of fact might be that this very doubt is what offers to the subject of his study its completeness. If love, as his essay suggests, is a departure, always coming from the outside, being this outside, it unveils finitude in its infinite crossing. As exposure, love is necessarily never fulfilled, it must be suspended in its sharing, in its offering to the outside. Without any appropriation possible, love remains outside of the dialectic that demands a subject; but love exposes the subject to everything that is not its dialectic. 'This is why love is always missed by philosophy … Perhaps it cannot help but be missed: one would not know how to seize or catch up with that which exposes'.[192] Philosophy misses its own essence insofar as thinking is love, but 'it misses by essence its own essence'.[193] This means that love is always offered to thought, it cannot and should not be complete, but can only be offered in shatters, cutting across finitude.

The postscript that follows Nancy's philosophical interpretation is in a way another 'shatter' of love. It is a proof of its truth, its proliferation and multiplicity, as well as its inability to 'come to its place'. In this piece that seems to be spontaneously written, the actual voice of love emerges, not its theorising but its precise essence as something not presentable. What is important is that in order for this to appear, a different language is necessary. The postscript can be read as a final attempt to express the theory not through the discourse of philosophy, that always misses love, but through something else, that is appropriate because of its contradiction to theory. The impersonal is sacrificed for the sake of the personal, but in a way that reveals its universality. Nancy is the author of both the essay and the postscript, but we could say that Nancy the philosopher writing about love is

[192] *Ibid*., p. 90
[193] *Ibid*., p. 91

sacrificed for the sake of Nancy writing in and through love. The latter seems to be detached from the impersonality of philosophy, allowing himself to be read as a distinct entity, but as a matter of fact, the very thing that singles him out, his being in love, is what places him in the most impersonal reality: he is exposed in finitude. Thinking love and being in love (inside, writing through it) are ultimately the same, the one not contradicting the other but completing it.

Part Two: Fictional Writings

Chapter Four: *Story of the Eye*

Story of the Eye, Georges Bataille's most celebrated fictional work, begins with a sentence that captures the mood of the whole book and leaves the reader, after a while, wondering what its purpose and meaning really is: 'I grew up very much alone, and as far back as I recall I was frightened of anything sexual'.[194] The narrator seems to be using this first sentence as an explanation, or an excuse for what he is about to describe. At the end of the first paragraph he goes on to say: 'I began to realize that she shared my anxiety at seeing her, and I felt even more anxious that day because I hoped she would be stark naked under the pinafore'.[195] This is how the narrator opens up the tale in which Simone, Marcelle and himself engage in a series of acts that certainly have the character of being sexual. What is puzzling is the fact that although the narrator claims to be 'frightened' of sexuality, he goes on to engage himself and the reader with all sorts of sexual acts. This contradicts the generally accepted view that anxiety, as a highly unpleasant affect, should be dealt with in a way that would force it to disappear in order not to produce this un-pleasure anymore. What causes this anxiety in him is precisely what he craves, therefore increasing his unpleasant condition rather than eliminating it.

Anxiety seems to be a crucial factor of what is about to follow, in the sense that it is the driving force behind the actions taking place, as well as their outcome. This affect is never diminished, and furthermore, the protagonists do not even seek to make it disappear. The episode with the young cyclist at the beginning of the tale, in which they accidentally crash into her and kill her, is indicative of the nature of their relationship and how anxiety, or even 'dread' is an essential part of their bond: 'The horror and

[194] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* Penguin Modern Classics, 2001, p. 9
[195] *Ibid.*

despair at so much bloody flesh, nauseating in part, and in part very beautiful, was fairly equivalent to our usual impression upon seeing one another'.[196]

In deciphering the meaning of anxiety, Freud's concept of fear as it is analysed in his essay 'Inhibition, Symptom and Fear' can be useful. Freud describes fear as a reaction to danger situations, which has some specific characteristics: it is a state of affect, something that can be felt only by the ego and which has a distinct character of unpleasure which separates it from other unpleasurable states such as pain and sorrow. Furthermore, fear can be of two kinds, the first being involuntary and automatic and arising whenever a danger situation occurs that is analogous to man's primal danger situation, the traumatic experience of birth; the second is a preventative measure against the threat of a danger situation which functions as a signal, specifically produced by the ego with the purpose of avoiding the subjection to a real attack. Freud goes on to differentiate objective and neurotic fear, the former being fear of a danger that is real and known, while the latter being fear of a danger that is unknown and posed by the drives from within. Regarding this non-objective type of fear, Freud specifies that the core of the danger situation is the ego's acknowledgement of its own psychic helplessness, and this situation is termed as 'traumatic'. In traumatic situations then, generated by the drives, fear functions as a signal warning us of the helplessness that is about to arise and is therefore 'on the one hand the *expectation* of future trauma, and on the other a *repetition* of past trauma in a mild form'.[197]

In *Story of the Eye* the protagonist's fear has an object which is stated right from the beginning: it is the fear of 'anything sexual'. This object, however, is not real and concrete but inner, and stemming from the sexual drive, if we follow Freud's thought. This means that the protagonist, when faced with 'anything sexual' is faced with his

[196] *Ibid*. p.11

[197] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Works*, Penguin Modern Classics, 2003, p. 234-235

own helplessness towards this situation and is experiencing the repetition of a past trauma which prevents his ego from falling prey to the actual danger situation. Here, however, in the course of the tale, the protagonist experiences with Simone, and later with Marcelle, the very thing that he is frightened of, namely sexual behaviour, and in this way he is driven to succumb to the danger causing his fear instead of avoiding it. In other words, the ego fails on its own defense technique, stubbornly refusing to avoid the danger and instead plunging right into it. The outcome of this behaviour is a combination of fear and pleasure, which brings together extreme pain and extreme joy in a state that these two cannot be separated. Later in the tale, when, after Marcelle's death the protagonist and Simone make love for the first time next to Marcelle's corpse, he states: 'It was very painful to both of us, but we were glad precisely because it *was* painful'.[198] The materialisation of his fear does not lead to its elimination, nor to its complete reign over him. In other words, he does not defeat his fear but neither is defeated by it. The pleasure that is gained through the various sexual experiences throughout the tale is not contradictory to the horror and pain that are also existent, but complementary to them. Extreme joy and extreme horror are part of the same experience in a way that reveals their connection as intrinsic; one does not exist without the other and they only manifest themselves when combined.

In order to evaluate Bataille's view on the Freudian concepts discussed in this instance, I would like to take a step back and discuss his claims in 'The Notion of Expenditure', published in 1933. There, Bataille presents his thoughts on the economic system of utility, having as a directly opposite example Freud's theoretical conception of the pleasure principle. In the first part of his essay entitled 'The Insufficiency of the Principle of Classical Utility', he points out the 'flatness' and 'untenability' of this conception, as well as its inability to capture the true condition of human existence. The

[198] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 43

Freudian model, being primarily of a negative nature as it highlights the struggle against pain, leads to the conception of pleasure as merely a concession, a diversion with a subsidiary role: 'The most appreciable share of life is given as the condition - sometimes even as the regrettable condition – of productive social activity'.[199] He goes on to present an analysis of several examples, in order to reestablish the notion of expenditure as an existent social function, and thus to express his view that *production* is a means towards expenditure and not the other way around. Acquisition is only secondary to the primary concept of expenditure, guided and ruled by the principle of *loss*. This principle is in direct contrast to the classical psychoanalytic pleasure principle, where what is of most value is balance, the diminution of excitation which results to a kind of soothing inertia. For Bataille, the principle of loss, governing the states of excitation, is the only one that can invest life with its true meaning: 'human life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by reasonable conceptions. The immense travail of recklessness, discharge, and upheaval that constitutes life could be expressed by stating that life starts only with the deficit of these systems'.[200] These reasonable conceptions, in which psychoanalysis as the product of scientific research is included, is out of the question when it comes to considering the problem of pleasure.

Freudian psychoanalysis offers as a solution a system that is strictly economical, and a principle that responds to nature's biological rules of the diminution of energy, the return to zero, to fundamental balance. Bataille's conception of nature however, escapes this rule, or rather perceives it in a completely different way. For him, nature is violent and exuberant, and the ruination that she continuously exhibits is what she demands from human beings. In *Eroticism* Bataille states that 'the more extravagant are the

[199] Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', p.117
[200] *Ibid.*, p.128

means of engendering life, the more costly is the production of new organisms, the more successful the operation is! The wish to produce at cut prices is niggardly and human'.[201] Nature violently expends in a wave of total destruction and ruination. Focusing on the prodigality and the enormous amounts of energy that are endlessly spent in nature, Bataille rejects any theoretical notion that does not conform to this fact. Calculated productivity has no place in the principle of loss where 'the *states of excitation,* which are comparable to toxic states, can be defined as the illogical and irresistible impulse to reject material or moral goods that it would have been possible to utilize rationally (in conformity with the balancing of accounts)'.[202]

For Bataille, the classical pleasure principle is not sufficient, so long as it does not take into account nature's exuberant and destructive ways. He is in search of a *beyond* of utility, literally *beyond the pleasure principle*. While Freud's beyond is found in the death drive, inside of the subject's individuality, for Bataille it is a more extreme beyond. It is found in ecstasy, in being outside of the self, via the medium of transgression. Man has to stand outside of himself in order to look at the complete picture, and to achieve that, he must surrender to nature's tide. The ultimate goal is free expenditure, the surrender to destruction, and not the conformity to a calm and safe balance. Utility is revealed in this way as having a relative value: 'Men assure their own subsistence or avoid suffering, not because these functions themselves lead to a sufficient result, but in order to accede to the insubordinate function of free expenditure'.[203]

I would like to turn now to contemporary psychoanalyst Adam Phillips and his discussion of 'The Helpless' in his book *On Balance,* in order to identify the significance that the feeling of helplessness may have on our account of anxiety.

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[201] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 60
[202] Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure',p.128
[203] *Ibid.,* p. 129

Phillips suggests that 'if we can't bear helplessness we can't bear satisfaction; There is a plot against helplessness, which turns out to be a plot against satisfaction. Real satisfaction, Freud implies, depends upon living without illusions, without the wishful magic of religious beliefs'.[204] Helplessness here is examined as something that could and should be used for our benefit instead of as a situation that is impossible to deal with. Since helplessness is the very thing we are born into, there is no existence that precedes it and it becomes an integral part of human life that defines our future and the shaping of our morality. Phillips, following Freud's theory, suggests that this inherent problem of helplessness can only be solved in two ways: it is either recognised as the precondition for satisfaction which therefore leads to its experience, or it is not recognised, repressed and replaced by the wish to be protected. In this second solution, instead of embracing our helplessness and the fact that it will never diminish but only increase in the course of our lives, we turn to self-deception: 'So terrorized are we by it that we will seek safety rather than satisfaction, magic rather than nourishment, disavowal rather than acknowledgement. We seem, in Freud's view, to be the animals who are tormented by our helplessness'.[205]

There are, therefore, two responses to helplessness: the first leads to satisfaction, while the second leads to self-deception. When the response is an embrace of helplessness, what is denied is the security of an enchanted, magic, but nevertheless safe world. In *Story of the Eye,* the protagonists' response is a complete plunge into their anxiety, into their acknowledgment of helplessness and a denial of the safety offered by religion or social law. The result is the excess, the lived experience or ecstasy of overcoming one's own limits. Etymologically, ecstasy (*ek* + *histamai,* translated from ancient Greek as *out* + *place/stand*) signifies an overcoming of the self, a placement

[204] Adam Phillips, *On Balance,* Hamish Hamilton Penguin Books, 2010, p. 140
[205] *Ibid.* p. 145

into a beyond or an outside. Ecstasy is here a synonym of helplessness and its direct result.

In *Story of the Eye* the reader is presented with a direct example of the clash between excess and religion, or, satisfaction and self-deception. In the last pages of the book the narrator, Simone and Sir Edmund find themselves in the church of Don Juan in Seville, where they rape and finally murder a priest. The intensity of the scene brings out the ecstatic frenzy of the protagonists who were 'coldly animated by the same determination together with an incredible excitement and levity'.[206] Their crime was not predetermined or planned, but occurred as a natural continuation of events, driven by their collective desire. I will suggest that their response to helplessness was not a choice but rather a compulsion, a reaction to their drives that did not allow any room for moral judgement or guilt. The result of their ecstasy is again a beyond that surpasses social rules, laws and everything that is characteristic of a social human being. This scene, although profoundly sexual, reveals the nature of ecstasy as *not only* sexual, but related to the whole spectrum of the self and its position. It is a culmination where everything is reunited: life, death, sexuality and knowledge, intermingled in images that bleed into one another revealing a deeply disturbing unity: 'I even felt as if my eyes were bulging from my head, erectile with horror; in *Simone's* hairy vagina I saw the wan blue eye of *Marcelle* gazing at me through tears of urine'.[207] In these last sentences of the tale the eye, present throughout the whole book and always displaced, takes its final place inside Simone where in a shocking experience it is transformed into Marcelle's eye. The eye becomes integrated in these series of transgression and in the end, it cannot any more be separated as an organ that deserves the special symbolisation of the privileged organ of knowledge.

[206] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 63
[207] *Ibid*. p. 67

In this evidently transgressive scene, the reader witnesses an overcoming of limits which has the meaning of an overcoming of the self. When the helpless ego does not seek the protection of religion and myths, sacrificing in this way its own satisfaction, it throws itself unprotected into the transgression of its own limits. For a moment, it allows itself the experience of satisfaction, rather than the illusion that can permanently transform the frustration of helplessness. Phillips in his book suggests:

> I take it that there is something about our helplessness – the pictures we have ourselves as helpless – that we find repulsive; and that the barriers that arise between each single ego and the other is, in part at least, a consequence of our disavowal of our original helplessness, which is the thing we have most originally in common with each other […].[208]

When this helplessness is not disavowed but embraced and recognised as a human fundamental condition, helplessness and ecstasy become one and the same: the limits in which the ego is contained and protected are transgressed and therefore, an outside, a beyond manifests itself.

In *Story of the Eye,* anxiety and helplessness never lead to a turning back, to the safety of illusion, but to the transgression of the ego's limits which results in the protagonists' temporary glimpse of satisfaction. This ecstatic satisfaction should not be understood as explicitly concerned with sexual satisfaction; The tale which unfolds in *Story of the Eye* can be said to be a tale of satisfied desire, but satisfaction is not a relief from anxiety. The reason for this could be closely linked to the fact that the transgression which leads to ecstasy is a notion that escapes the boundaries of sexuality and is concerned rather with man's being, his existence and its limits. In the same way that helplessness never diminishes, anxiety, in this novel, also never ceases.

[208] Phillips, *On Balance,* p. 157

I would like now to return to the actual tale, it order to look therein for the cause of the protagonists' anxiety and what implications it has for the whole narrative. The tale in the original begins with the following sentence: 'j'ai été élevé seul, et aussi loin que je me le rappelle, j'étais anxieux des choses sexuelles', revealing the story to be one about 'sexual things', the kind of which the narrator admits to be provoking his anxiety. The question that needs to be addressed is what exactly are these 'choses sexuelles', these 'sexual things'. In *Story of the Eye,* as in many of Bataille's fictional and theoretical works, sexuality is very closely linked to death, in a way that these two are presented as each other's extremes. In this novel, sex is never performed or enjoyed in a conventional way. On the contrary, what it reveals is the horror of death, through the anxiety which seems to be so interconnected with sexuality. This anxiety about sexuality should not be interpreted as strictly concerned with the sexual acts described in the tale, seen under some sort of duality that opposes the normal and the perverse. In other words, the perverse nature of sexuality in the tale should not lead us to believe that *it* is the reason for the unease, as a kind of anxiety of abjection, of exclusion from normality.

'Anything sexual' as it is translated in English, could reveal that sexuality serves as that which unveils the anxiety, as a sort of tool, or mediator, whose function is to reveal the essence of things as anxious. It is not the case that everything considered as sexual has the character of anxiety, as if sexuality itself has an inherent quality connected with this characterisation, but rather that seen under the light of sexuality, all things acquire the power of generating anxiety. In the novel, the objects used for creating sexual images such as eggs, eyes, milk, the sky, are not of an explicitly sexual nature, yet in their use, they seem to generate this anxious affect that flows throughout the tale. The way in which all the objects are perceived is not an illustrative one, nor an interpretive one. The images that are created cannot be taken literally; the eye for

example, is completely torn apart from its primordial use as the organ that sees, and its meaning is altered irreversibly.

Roland Barthes attempts a symbolic reading of the tale, deciphering the chain of globular and white objects as the primary metaphor, and the chain of liquid objects and their avatars as the secondary one. With the interchange of the two chains and the play of metaphor and metonymy, 'the world becomes *blurred*; properties are no longer separate; spilling, sobbing, urinating, ejaculating form a *wavy* meaning, and the whole of *Story of the Eye* signifies in the manner of a vibration that always gives the same sound (but what sound?)'.[209] Although the novel can and has been described as pornographic, this characterisation underestimates the fact that what is affected, or even distorted in this 'story' is not only sex, but rather the world as such. The world becomes blurred through sexuality. The feelings that are raised concern man in the whole of his existence and not only his sexual behaviour, as if the latter was only an aspect of man, a part of his identity that is separated and distinct from his being. Barthes goes on to say that what is transgressed in *Story of the Eye* is sex, insisting on the fact that this is not the same as sublimating it, but rather the contrary. If we accept that the 'sexual things' in *Story of the Eye* have a wider and more general meaning that escapes the world of images and discourse which we are used to, then the anxiety that accompanies them is revealed as an equally general feeling that justifies the impossibility of labelling the novel as strictly pornographic, or erotic, in the traditional sense. The anxiety then, does not concern sexuality in a strict sense but could be of an existential nature, rooted at the very core of one's being.

I would like to pursue this thought further with the aid of German philosopher Martin Heidegger's views on anxiety. In his major work *Being and Time*, Heidegger focuses on the concept of *Angst* – translated in English as *anxiety* – which he examines

[209] Roland Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* Penguin, 2001, p.125

in his phenomenological approach as a basic state-of-mind in which Dasein is disclosed. This philosophical study of anxiety can offer some insight on the existential character of anxiety in *Story of the Eye*. For Heidegger, Dasein is most of the time absorbed in the world of concern, in what he calls the publicness of the *They.* In its everydayness, Dasein is falling into the They, where everything is publicly interpreted in a familiar and superficial way. 'Idle talk and curiosity take care in their ambiguity to ensure that what is genuinely and newly created is out of date as soon as it emerges before the public'.[210] The function of the They is to tranquillise and alienate Dasein as it gets more and more absorbed in its 'they-self'. This '*downward plunge*' as he calls it, is described as a temptation which is extremely difficult to resist. Being lost in the They offers the feeling of familiarity in the world which concerns us and the security of being at home. In *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology,* Heidegger writes:

> [Dasein] finds *itself* primarily and constantly *in things* because, tending them, distressed by them, it always in some way or the other rests in things. Each one of us is what he pursues and cares for. In everyday terms, we understand ourselves and our existence by way of the activities we pursue and the things we take care of. We understand ourselves by starting from them because the Dasein finds itself primarily in things.[211]

These 'things' that allow Dasein to find itself, are the exact same things that make up the world, that give meaning to Dasein's being as being-in-the-world; and they belong to the sphere of everydayness, where Dasein for the most part dwells.

When, therefore, Dasein is lost in the They, everything has a meaning with which it can identify and understand itself. The question is whether there is a mode, a state-of-

[210] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* Blackwell, 2009, p.218
[211] Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology,* Indiana University Press, 1983, p. 159

mind where Dasein is detached from this familiarity that forces it to an inauthentic way of being. Heidegger suggests that the basic state-of-mind which has the ability to perform such a task is *Angst*. In anxiety, Dasein is fleeing from *itself*, and not from an entity that is part of the familiar world; the threat that it is experiencing has no definite source or even form: 'that in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is *nowhere.* Anxiety 'does not know' what that in the face of which it is anxious is'.[212] This is what invests anxiety with its great significance: it reveals the world as world, the world in its purity, through the world's absence. In anxiety then, all the entities within the world lose their significance and therefore Dasein becomes individualised in a world that has no meaning for it. This individualisation allows the possibilities of Dasein to be seen as they are: 'undisguised by entities within-the-world, to which, proximally and for the most part, Dasein clings'.[213] Without significance, Dasein has nothing to hold on to, and this is what generates the dreadfulness of anxiety: the uncanniness, the not-at-home, the unfamiliar. The tranquility of the They is vanished, and what is left is the naked, individualised Dasein which is not falling into the They anymore but faced with its own possibilities.

In *Story of the Eye,* the characters' transgressive experiences lead to an overcoming of the real world, to a state that is beyond conventional understanding. In the chapter entitled 'A Trickle of Blood', the narrator says:

> We had abandoned the real world, the one made up solely of dressed people, and the time elapsed since then was already so remote as to seem almost beyond reach. Our personal hallucination now developed as boundlessly as perhaps the total nightmare of human society, for instance, with earth, sky,

[212] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* p. 231
[213] *Ibid.*, p. 191

and atmosphere.[214]

Simone and the narrator shift in and out of this real world which is tangible, concrete and full of dressed people, with the medium of sexuality. As they are both pedalling away from the sanatorium, the narrator's thoughts continue:

> And it struck me that death was the sole outcome of my erection, and if Simone and I were killed, then the universe of our unbearable personal vision was certain to be replaced by the pure stars, fully unrelated to any external gazes and realizing in a cold state, without human delays or detours, something that strikes me as the goal of my sexual licentiousness: a geometric incandescence (among other things, the coinciding point of life and death, being and nothingness), perfectly fulgurating.[215]

In these thoughts the connection of sexuality with death is revealed as an issue that concerns the core of one's being. Anxiety here, always closely linked with the sexual, is illuminated in a way that shows its deep relation to an existential *Angst.* The abandonment of the real world, the non-existence of external gazes and human delays are highlighted as a presupposition for what is described, and as that which leads to the narrator's striking realisation. Life and death, being and nothingness, are the bare possibilities laid in front of one who has utterly detached oneself from the everydayness of the world. Their nakedness and the fact that the real world is that of the dressed people, can be read as signifying the protagonists' complete uprooting from their society that dresses itself and everything around it with meaning and usefulness. The anxiety may be, as stated from the very beginning, about 'anything sexual', but this

[214] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 29
[215] *Ibid.*, p.30

sexuality manages to unveil being's outmost possibilities.

I would like to consider at this point the effect that anxiety as the constant state of *Story of the Eye* has on its reader, for I argue that the mood of the tale is not only maintained in the fictional events taking place, but it is also manifested in the reader's actual reaction towards the book. *Story of the Eye* is a novel that has the ability to meddle with the meaning of its objects, or even to strip them off of their significance completely. Throughout the tale, anxiety is flowing together with the images that interchange with one another, and this does not only contribute to the atmosphere of the novel as obscure or disturbing, but also to the reader's reaction, to whom this anxiety is transmitted. When our everyday meaningful objects lose their familiarity, our ability to interpret the world according to the They, in Heideggerian terms, is lost too. As the story unfolds the protagonists, along with the reader, are absorbed into a reality with no stability, where the entities within the world cannot be distinguished anymore according to their purpose and their usefulness. The text in its structure transforms our everyday understanding of reality in a way that is profoundly unsettling. As Patrick ffrench points out in his study *The Cut/Reading Bataille's Histoire de l' Oeil*, 'the abject of structure is the absence of ground. This abject is and is not a thing. It is and is not the eye, the egg, for these objects are and are not themselves. The Bataillean object is abject to the extent that it is not what it is: leakage, spillage, overflow'.[216] When Simone is asked what the word *uriner* means to her, she replies, 'gaily playing with words': '*Buriner*, les yeux, avec un rasoir, quelque chose de rouge, le soleil. Et l'œuf? Un œil de veau, en raison de la couleur de la tête; et d'ailleurs le blanc d' œuf était du blanc d'œil, et le jaune la prunelle. La forme de l' œil, à l' entendre, était celle l'œuf. […] Elle jouait gaiement sur les mots, disant tantôt *casser un œil, tantôt crever un œuf*, tenant d'insoutenables

[216] Patrick ffrench, *The Cut/Reading Bataille's Histoire de l' Oeil*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 25

raisonnements'.[217] This sequence of words that Simone uses demonstrates clearly the way in which objects collapse into one another, destroying the meaningful linguistic order that holds together our world of understanding. Without this common understanding, the familiarity of the world is taken away from us, and there remains nothing to cling to.

Heidegger's distinction between *Angst* and *fear* can be useful here in elucidating the source of each of these affects and the former's importance, especially in the reading of *Story of the Eye.* Fear in *Being and Time,* is discussed as a mode of state-of-mind which belongs to Dasein's Being-in-the-world. One can only be afraid in this sense, of entities which are known and familiar, and which have the character of being threatening and detrimental. In Heideggerian terms, *that in the face of which* we fear is an entity within-the-world which is threatening and coming close, and *that about which* we fear is Dasein, which in this state is disclosed as endangered and abandoned. In Angst, the 'in the face of which' and the ''about which' are exactly the same: Being-in-the-world. This means that, while in fear, the source is an entity within the world which is known and familiar, in angst, the source cannot be found and it has the character of indefiniteness and insignificance. This is why, in angst, faced with Being-in-the-world which is deprived of any significance, Dasein flees towards the entities within-the-world that are known and familiar: 'When in falling we flee *into* the "at-home" of publicness, we flee *in the face of* the "not-at-home"; that is, we flee in the face of the uncanniness which lies in Dasein. […] This uncanniness pursues Dasein constantly, and

[217] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 34. Then Georges Bataille, *Histoire De L'Œil,* Collection L'Imaginaire, Gallimard, 1979, p. 51. I have cited the French original here in order to convey the way in which both objects and words collapse into one another. The English translation reads: 'Upon my asking what the word *urinate* reminded her of, she replied: *terminate*, the eyes, with a razor, something red, the sun. And *egg*? A calf's eye, because of the colour of the head (the calf's head) and also because the white of the egg was the white of the eye, and the yolk the eyeball. […] She played gaily with words, speaking about *broken eggs*, and then *broken eyes*, and her arguments became more and more unreasonable.' *Story of the Eye*, p. 34

is a threat to its everyday lostness in the "they", though not explicitly'.[218] The uncanniness, meaning literally the 'not at home' in German, is what is so dreadful in Angst and its source is the absence of significance in the objects that constitute the 'at home'.

In the dreadfulness of Angst, Dasein is individualised, in the sense that it is faced with itself outside of its safe and familiar reality. In this anxious state it can see its possibilities as they are, naked and pure, and this is something that Dasein cannot bear. When meaning is absent, what is left is the world which suddenly is of no significance, and where the whole referential totality of objects and their 'in-order-tos' fails to provide any use. The way of being-in-the-world which anxiety reveals is a way of being where '[Dasein's] *falling is grounded rather in anxiety, which in turn is what first makes fear possible*'.[219] Instead of turning away from the entities that are threatening in fear, in anxiety Dasein turns towards them as a desperate attempt not to face its individuality but rather to lose itself in the publicness of the They where it can safely be absorbed by the things that matter to it.

In *Story of the Eye,* the protagonists experience their continuous and persistent anxiety when they allow themselves to be lost in their 'personal hallucination' where society and reason cannot interfere. The objects that are and are not themselves create the universe of liquid instability that leaves no room for groundedness and order. It is anxiety rather than fear that is the dominant affect in the tale, as the protagonists have no anchor from where to regain the safety of the publicness. Nothing experienced in our everydayness, in our 'normality' can ever reach the level of dread when Dasein faces its bare existence. In our absorption we find ourselves concerned with the entities around us in a way that allows us to feel at home. Simone and the narrator find themselves

[218] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* p. 234
[219] *Ibid*., p 230

naked, individualised, separated from the world of their concern. Therefore, they are not falling anymore, the tranquility and safety of the They disappears and the possibilities of authenticity and inauthenticity are laid bare in front of them.

Reading *Story of the Eye* in the light of Heidegger's views, can offer a perspective that enriches it by adding to the sexual anxiety, a deeper existential aspect that concerns man in his very being. The protagonists are driven to their transgressive acts by a power that is beyond all reason and understanding. The narrator from the very beginning speaks of 'something that drove them urgently to defy modesty', 'une sorte de malaise', which does not result to sexual pleasure but rather to jouissance, to anxiety, to death. Before fleeing to Spain, at the end of the chapter entitled 'The Open Eyes of the Dead Woman', the narrator says: 'the contradictory impulses overtaking us in this circumstance neutralized one another, leaving us blind and, as it were, very remote from anything we touched, in a world where gestures have no carrying power, like voices in a space that is absolutely soundless'.[220] The absolutely soundless space is the background of the tale, like a vacuum that is filled with entities that do not confer any meaning but are constantly melting into one another. In such a place, there is nothing familiar to hold on to, in other words, there is no place for 'fear' but only for genuine angst and the facing of existence as such.

I would like now to take a step back and look at Bataille's own views on Being and its existence, in order to find the grounds for supporting a proximity to Heidegger's thoughts on the existential value of anxiety and its connection to sexuality. Bataille in his essay 'Sacrifices', written in 1936, engages with existentialism, and unfolds his philosophical thoughts on the problem of *that which exists*, starting with the existence of '*le moi*'. This 'me' has a unique existence which is dominant and completely different from all the other 'mes'. Nevertheless, it is anxious, because of its realisation

[220] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 44

of the infinite improbability of its coming to the world. The me can be presented 'in tears or anxious', or it can let itself be erotically involved with another me, equally anxious, with the result of merely increasing its anxiety. Only in the '*me that dies*', at the limit of the violence of death can it be free, transcending itself and everything around it. While this essay is filled with existential, one could even say Heideggerian terms such as *projection*, *anxiety, throwness*, *fall* and *absorption*, what provides it with a unique character is its position on the *ecstasy* of sexuality.

Time is presented as the structure of the me, and as the object of its erotic ecstasy. Furthermore, the ecstasy of time is revealed as in accordance with the ecstasy of the *me that dies*, both having the character of illusion. Thus, the me and time are revealed in their existence as illusory and as the object of erotic ecstasy.

> The being which, under a human name, is *me*, and whose coming into the world – across a space peopled with stars - was infinitely improbable, nevertheless encloses the world of the totality of things precisely because of its fundamental improbability […]. The death that delivers me from the world that kills me *has* enclosed this real world in the unreality of the *me* that dies.[221]

In this closing paragraph of 'Sacrifices', Bataille manages to merge his views on human existence with the totality of the world in the form of illusion. Death, sexuality and time, are in their ecstasy what make up man's being, where profound existence is itself enclosed into the illusion. 'And just as the freed obscene nature of their organs more passionately connects embracing lovers, so too the nearby horror of the cadaver and the present horror of blood tie the *me* that dies more obscurely to an empty infinity – and

[221] Bataille, 'Sacrifices', in *Visions of Excess*, p. 135-136

this empty infinity is itself projected as cadaver and as blood'.[222] This powerful image allows the connection between the raw sexuality, the ecstasy of death and the projection into the illusion of existence to be seen clearly. Only when the 'logical', 'theoretical' self is overthrown, can the limits of death be overthrown, and the death of God made possible. This means that life ceases to desire the avoidance of death, but rather the opposite; the horror, destruction and 'imperative joy in the heavy animality of death'.[223]

Bataille's existentialism is taking into account sexuality as a notion integral to man's being, and not as a 'necessary evil' that has to be considered separately. In *Story of the Eye,* when the narrator speaks of the 'personal hallucination' that he shared with Simone, he is referring to their unique conception of reality, separated from the world that the whole of society shares. Their experience of raw, unromanticised, de-sublimated sexuality is what makes this conception possible, which reveals death as 'the sole outcome of his erection'.[224] The being that is anxious can, in transgressing the limits of death, become the '*me that dies*', transcending everything that exists in erotic ecstasy. In the movement of the lovers, being and nothingness coincide, overcoming the existence of things, which, 'assuming the value for *me* – projecting an absurd shadow – of the preparations for an execution, cannot enclose the death it brings, but is itself projected into this death, which encloses it'.[225]

In order to clear up the notion of transgression in *Story of the Eye* I will need to address at this point the issue of the personal and the social that are sharply contrasted in the course of the tale. Transgression seems to take place only when that which Phillips calls 'the self deception of social rules', or what Heidegger terms as 'the publicness of the They' collapses, and this leads to the understanding of ecstasy as a

[222] *Ibid.*, p. 133
[223] *Ibid.*, p. 132
[224] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 30
[225] Bataille, 'Sacrifices', p. 135

phenomenon that is deeply personal and individualised. In the novel, the figures of authority seem to exist only in order to be ignored, or even mocked. Simone's mother is portrayed as the shadow of a woman who has absolutely no authority over her daughter; Simone encourages the narrator to 'pretend there's no one there' and the two protagonists continue their sexual games, 'as though the woman had been reduced to a family portrait'.[226] Another striking example is the never seen but only assumed police, whom the narrator, Simone and Sir Edmund manage to trick by playfully disguising themselves all through Andalusia. The attitude towards social order and law is that of complete mockery and this manages to annul any social ground that can provide the basis for the tale. The events are situated in a space where law in not non-existent, but transgressed, surpassed, and furthermore, it is transgressed in an experience that is personal in an almost mystical way.

I will suggest that there is no place for society in *Story of the Eye,* if society is considered to be a set of rules that its members abide to. Contrary to Bataille's theoretical works, as well as his other novels, for example *Blue of Noon* and *Madame Edwarda* where sociality plays a crucial part in defining transgression, here it seems to be of a completely internal character. If we consider the anxiety in this novel as fundamentally bound with transgression, we could suggest that the former is the central factor for determining the importance of the social or the communal. Anxiety is presented as a personal affect that flows throughout every transgressive experience that is described in the novel. In *Eroticism,* Bataille expresses the view that the inner experience of eroticism 'demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it.' And further on: 'Anybody who does not feel or who feels only furtively the anguish, nausea and horror commonly felt by young girls in the last century is not susceptible to these

[226] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 15

emotions […]'.[227] Anguish, nausea and horror are the preconditions for an inner experience that has the character of religious sensibility. It seems that, for this inner experience to be felt, one has to be alone, confronted only with one's own being and desire, which is to say, confronted with one's own limits and death, for 'the thing we desire most ardently is the most likely to drag us into wild extravagance and to ruin us'.[228]

In his fiction, and in *Story of the Eye* more specifically, Bataille's thoughts on this personal level of transgression are exposed more clearly, precisely because they are depicted as experiences themselves. When something is characterised as 'inner', as an experience that must be lived, it is difficult to imagine how it could be outlined in theory. Fiction has the advantage of carrying the reader along with the narrative in a way that she is involved actively in the tale. In this novel, the transgression that the protagonists experience from the beginning until the end, along with the affect of anxiety that accompanies it, are transmitted to the reader in a peculiar way. The reading of this novel is itself an issue that can shed light not only on the notion of anxiety, but also on the notion of transgression.

Story of The Eye comes in the Penguin Classics edition (first published in 1982) with two essays by Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. These essays have come to be so closely associated with the reading of this book that one could say that they almost form part of it. Apart from their illuminating effect, they also underline something else concerning the novel's reader, and that is her bafflement. Sontag's link of Bataille's 'pornographic imagination' with death and her view that his works 'indicate the aesthetic possibilities of pornography as an art form',[229] as well as Barthes' structural explanation which guides the reader as to the way she should understand the symbolism

[227] Bataille, *Eroticism,* pp. 38, 39
[228] *Ibid.*, p. 86
[229] Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination' in *Story of the Eye,* p. 111

and metaphors throughout the book, serve as guidelines to its reading. The need to help the reader understand is evident and it is close to something like a concern on the publisher's part to justify why this novel full of absurdity and obscenity is worth of being described as 'one of the erotic classics of the 20th century' – as reads the back cover of the 2001 Penguin edition.

This necessity to help the reader is not unjustified. The reader's experience, forced to take part in the narrative and involve herself in the absurdity of the tale is itself baffling. This book does not offer the security and comfort of a clear beginning, middle and, most importantly, end. There is no sense of closure; on the contrary the tale ends with the three accomplices leaving Spain and sailing 'towards new adventures with a crew of Negroes'.[230] There is no *catharsis* in *Story of the Eye.* As opposed to the ancient tragedy where the rejuvenating feeling of the audience emerges from the restoration of order after the *peripeteia* and the final punishment of the hero, here Oedipus does not pluck his eyes off to seal his cursed fate; rather he keeps drifting in a circle with no beginning and no end which is outside of all moral judgement and therefore outside of any punishment and *catharsis.*

The feeling of something pending leaves the reader unsatisfied, in the sense that she cannot find what it is that characterises the book she has just read. There is no simple answer to the question 'did you or did you not like this book'. To 'like' something presupposes that one understands what it is, that one can group it together with something else sharing some or all of its characteristics, so that its qualities can be compared in order for a decision to be reached about whether it has met one's standards of taste. Not being able to label it, 'name' it in a specific way such as 'pornographic', or even 'horrific' or 'perverse' is quite unsettling.

Stepping into Lord Auch's world, the credited author of *Story of the Eye*, means

[230] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 67

stepping into a fantasy that is devoid of any moral judgment and therefore the anchor that serves as a link between the self and society, thus creating the social human beings that we are, is missing. But if there is no identification with our social, moral self, there must be something else that *Story of the Eye* offers which has the ability to engage the reader so powerfully; without social ground, what is left is the experience of vertigo, or void. The void as an experience is not equal to the nothingness or emptiness of indifference; after all, indifference can only manifest itself when it relates to something that belongs to a socially representable human sphere. Here, the novel opens up a world of transgression, in which the reader is invited to participate. Bataille's comparison of literature to sacrifice could be of help on the matter of this participation: 'Following upon religion, literature is in fact religion's heir. A sacrifice is a novel, a story, illustrated in a bloody fashion'.[231] The reader desires to experience through literature what she cannot, out of fear or cowardice actually live: 'the greatest anguish, the anguish in the face of death, is what men desire in order to transcend it beyond death and ruination'.[232] Sacrifice, and also literature to a lesser degree of intensity, serve as mediators to man's witnessing, or experiencing of death. While *Story of the Eye* is captivating, it brings the reader face to face with that which she cannot explain or articulate, precisely because it crosses the limits of her 'profane' existence.

However, just like the narrator, recalling the bullfight in Madrid on May 7, preserved Simone's round paper fan and an illustrated brochure in order 'to fix that event to the earthly soil, to a geographic point and a precise date',[233] the reader is constantly drawn back to reality. She is well aware of the fictional character of the story, each time she feels with her hands the materiality of the paper in turning the pages. The reading of a book could never of course have the same effect that sacrifice has to the

[231] Bataille, *Eoticism,* p. 87
[232] *Ibid*.
[233] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 50

participants, but the feeling of uneasiness of that which cannot be expressed is related to it. It is important that the unsettling effect of this book is not directly derived from the images it creates and the obscene scenes it describes. In other words, it is not disgust about the concrete representation of scenes like Simone inserting the bull's testicle into her vagina, or the ritualistic murder and the removal of the priest's eye that produce the reader's unease, but the overall 'sense' of the novel. In fact, *Story of the Eye* is full of absurd images, thoughts, comments, whose sexual perversion is more than evident. However, the choice of objects and the way they are linked together creates a text whose reading escapes the familiar representational one.

The reader's enforcement on the one hand, in a world of complete disengagement with the reality that she knows and has a firm grasp on, and her simultaneous return to this exact reality (after all she is just reading a book) on the other, seem to generate this feeling of vertigo. If we follow Bataille on his thoughts on transgression, we see that the 'sacred world', the world of transgression, is not the opposite of the 'profane world' but rather its complementary side. The excess that emanates from transgression can only be obtained by a being who can understand what it is, the reasonable being that has denied nature in favour of work, and consequently of the creation of civilisation. The denial of the law is only secondary to the first and fundamental denial of nature and animality. This clinging to reality is what makes any transgression possible and therefore we should not consider a complete surrender to Bataille's imagination as a necessary factor for experiencing the effect of his writings. Bataille's reader is not necessarily familiar with his work and his background, in other words there is no need for some academic or philosophical education in order for her to experience this void that *Story of the Eye* generates.

Bataille himself, as the author of both the first part, the tale, and the second part of *Story of the Eye,* entitled 'Coincidences', relates the narrative to his own childhood

experiences, presenting at the end of his book the events that triggered his imagination and how his memories found their way in his writings: 'There was no way I could restore them to life except by transforming them and making them unrecognizable, at first glance, to my eyes, solely because during that deformation they acquired the lewdest of meanings'.[234] The character of the 'Coincidences' resembles that of a psychoanalytic session, and in fact, Bataille was under analysis during the writing of this book by Adrien Borel. One could say that *Story of the Eye* is precisely the product of analysis, which would imply that it has a therapeutic value for its author and, in a roundabout way, for his readers. What is striking is that contrary to psychoanalysis, where symbolism's function is to conceal, obscure the sexually obscene and therefore censored image, Bataille does something completely different. Obscenity for him is a means for unblocking his traumatic experiences and bringing them to his consciousness. As Patrick ffrench puts it, 'with 'Coincidences' Bataille is undoing ('dejouant') the code of psychoanalysis, while at the same time being caught in his own undoing, as he 'fixes' the structural play of the text in relation to his own childhood family drama'.[235] In this way, Bataille, (not Lord Auch) reads the tale and provides in turn to his reader this second reading. The complication manifests itself in this moment when the reader is faced with a novel which includes this explanatory reading of the author in its nature as a novel. But if for the author the tale is of therapeutic value, for the reader it is a contribution to her bafflement and a further generator of anxiety.

The first sentence of the 'Coincidences' characterises the tale as 'partly imaginary', and goes on to link the author's memories to the text. However, this does not have a comforting effect on the reader. Her disengagement from all the events taking place in the first part, with this 'confession' that somehow admits the personal

[234] *Ibid.* p. 74
[235] ffrench, *The Cut*, p. 172

triggering of the facts is not reassuring. The fact that reassurance and comfort are not at all evident, shows that *Story of the Eye* touches upon something more universal than a personal confession and representation of traumatic experiences. Patrick ffrench proposes a reading of the book that focuses not only on its structural strategy of displacement of its objects but also on a 'haunting of itself by itself' which can define *Story of the Eye* as 'the story of the eye as it moves its way forward like a blind hand through the text, cutting through and across, in its play, the images of the eye of vision'.[236] The eye of vision, of knowledge, is also the eye of the reader. Here her own eye is displaced, as in the text, removed from its 'correct' location and therefore unable to perform its intended human operation of seeing, of knowing. Moving through the text without ever reaching the security of an identification with a real object, one that is representable of something in the familiar 'profane world' leaves the reader, as mentioned above, unsatisfied and anxious.

The case would be simpler if we could replace every object in the tale by its representative and form a clear meaning out of this interpretation. Barthes in 'The Metaphor of the Eye' proposes that the novel consists of two intermingling chains of metaphor, the first one related to the eye and the egg and their qualities of roundness and whiteness, and the second to the properties of liquefaction and the associations made by them. In his words, 'the thing that the play of metaphor and metonymy in *Story of the Eye* makes it possible ultimately to transgress is sex – which is not, of course the same as sublimating it, rather the contrary'.[237] The metaphorical richness of the text is of course evident and the analysis of its meaning extremely helpful on the account of its reading. However, even a complete supplementation of the symbols to their representatives would not erase the affects generated in the reader. Whether she is aware

[236] *Ibid*. p. 176
[237] Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p. 126

of the chains of metaphors or not, the effect that this novel has on her is the same; and this is precisely because her own eye of reason is displaced; the reader is not the reasonable being of knowledge but, as ffrench puts it, 'the eye moving forward like a blind hand through the text'.[238] What a displaced eye experiences could never be explained in the words of reason, in language, the instrument of the reasonable being.

This is what the experience of vertigo signifies: an affect (since it is felt from within and has a certain nuance of unpleasantness) which nevertheless has to remain nameless for it signifies something which crosses the limits of language. The reader's reaction, who cannot describe what it is precisely that this book made her feel, is probably accurate, if we accept that *Story of the Eye* is itself a transgression of one's identification with one's self as a being of knowledge. If 'the task of the word "œil" is thus to put to work those qualities occluded by the sublimation of the eye as seeing organ of knowledge and thereby to undo all the cultural and philosophical architecture constructed around sight',[239] the reader is left with no tools with which to rationalise her experience and place it under a comforting categorisation. The human need to rationalise is left unsatisfied creating a black hole in one's consciousness, a place where the weapons of reason are of no use.

Speaking of a void in terms of affects and feelings is of course problematic. The word void itself relates to a gap, to something empty, without substance. If we consider the psychoanalytic origin of the term affect, we could say that it somehow relates to human consciousness as it represents a reaction to a need, or to a satisfaction of a need guided by the pleasure principle. In other words, affects respond to internal or external stimuli that are necessarily translated by the subject and have a meaning for the subject. Losing a loved one for example, leads to the triggering of feelings of sorrow and loss.

[238] ffrench, *The Cut*, p. 176
[239] *Ibid.*, p. 32

The subject is conscious of the reason for the feeling of sorrow, can put it into words and even explain it to another person. When the root of an affect is not able to be described by means of language it has to remain unnamed, but it is felt nonetheless. In the absence of knowledge, or rather rationalisation, affects reign, and they reign completely since they cannot even be boxed into a rational explanation. Lack of rationality does not equal nothingness. An affect which is not explained in rational terms denotes the void that exists, but only in a sphere outside of language itself. The word 'void' exists, but it remains empty, for its content is something that escapes rational interpretation.

The reader's experience of her reading of *Story of the Eye* as a feeling of void, is related to the book's character as a tale of transgression. In terms of the tale, the story is, in a few words, a story of sexual perversions, where the protagonists engage to different sexual acts, none of which could be characterised as 'normal'. Normality here is not even the exception, as even in the scenes where for example, the narrator and Simone have vaginal sex, for the first time, this occurs next to Marcelle's dead body. 'It was painful for both of us, but we were glad precisely because it *was* painful',[240] the narrator explains. Sexuality is always linked to horror and death in an unmistakable way that manages to annihilate this aforementioned sense of normality and reveal what for Bataille is its meaning. The denial of sexual pleasure through traditional ways is evident throughout the tale, and it illuminates the denial of the law of sexuality.

In terms of the social law, we witness the protagonists commit serious crimes, the most extreme being towards the end of the book where the trio murders and rapes the priest in Seville. What is missing throughout the whole tale is a sense of guilt that would situate the heroes in a social environment, and hold them accountable for their actions. The events that take place are completely detached from a social reality and

[240] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 43

have the element of fantasy, where every rule can be broken according to the subject's will. Here the narrator, Simone and Sir Edmund share the same fantasy which is realised under the sun of Seville, without any ethical or moral remorse. Their sexual and sadistic impulses are free and the transgression of the sexual taboo as well as the taboo against murder takes place.

The objects and associations used in the novel, all in the service of sexual and social transgression, are themselves the evidence of a crossing of limits. First and foremost, the eye is completely displaced from its ordinary place, and so is its function. It is devoid of any sublimation as the eye that learns, that sees and understands, and it is left with its qualities as a concrete object, outside of its common place in the human body. The eye is an object which is used sexually, and so is the egg and the bull's testicle. The symbol of man's superiority as a being of knowledge is annihilated and thus opens up a field where all of humanity's order is transgressed. In a sense, when the fundamental law of reason is transgressed, everything loses its earthly properties and becomes unable to be interpreted, understood. Sexuality or murder from this perspective, cannot have the meaning that is socially attached to them. Even more so, Bataille does not leave any possibility of clinging onto a social sense of responsibility or guilt. The narrative is enclosed into its own rules, which are nothing but the surpassing of the social rules of civilised humanity.

Apart from the way in which the tale is presented, where the constant use of metaphor and symbolism denies a clear identification with reality, the book itself is constructed in a non-traditional way, which again denies the reader the 'pleasure' of a safe categorisation. With 'Coincidences', Bataille chooses to involve himself as the author of *Story of the Eye,* side by side with Lord Auch and opens up in this manner the question of his book's genre. By offering a reading of the tale related to his own childhood memories he interferes with its character as a novel confusing the

relationship between real and fantasy. Had the 'Coincidences' been absent, not forming what should be read as part of the whole book, its characterisation would be more straightforward as to what it is. Reality and fantasy are intermingled in the *Story of the Eye,* again crossing the limits between them.

Story of the Eye is a tale of transgression, on many levels, in its structure as well as its content. Sexual transgression, to begin with, is perhaps the most clear and straightforward one. Bataille's notion of sexuality has the ability to be presented as something that crosses its own limits, and in this sense, leaves no room for the psychoanalytic explanation as a means for sublimation. What is transgressed throughout the whole novel is the sexual self, whose limits are surpassed and moved to a beyond, outside the reality of humanity. However, the sexual self is not seen as a mere aspect of man, but as the very core of his being. When sexuality is transgressed, the whole realm of normal life is transgressed, and with it the comfortable, acceptable identity of human beings. The novel by overcoming the limits of sexuality makes manifest the world detached from everything that we are used to describe as worldly – as belonging to the very essence of world.

On another level, space and time are transgressed systematically, creating an unstable background where events take place freely, without ever being attached to something that can provide a basis for comparison. As ffrench suggests, 'the text spends very little time on narrative transition from one space to the other, does not concern itself with establishing the chronology as *vraisemblable,* or with descriptions of its locations other than those taken up in the logic of the texts structure of images'.[241] Time and space do not provide the basis for the events, but rather the contrary. They seem to obey the unfolding of the tale, in a secondary way, merely providing a nucleus from which the fundamental transgressive experiences can arise.

[241] ffrench, *The Cut*, p. 87

The illusional character of the tale is also in accordance with the breaking of the limits of closed spaces; the body is transformed itself into a space where eggs and eyes are ejected, and which culminates towards the end of the tale in the powerful scene where all objects merge together in this enclosed space. When Simone inserts into her body the priest's eye, the narrator has his unifying experience: 'in *Simone's* hairy vagina, I saw the wan blue eye of *Marcelle,* gazing at me through tears of urine'.[242] The limits of the body are transgressed, and they bring together through this transgression, all the elements of roundness, whiteness and humidity. The whole personal illusion of the narrator is to be found inside Simone's body, which serves as the place in which phantasy is realised.

Transgression, however, although identified as having many different levels, cannot be said to be divided in sub-categories, each of them distinct from another. It is first and foremost an experience, and as such it carries a certain affect which is whole and inseparable. The wholeness of transgression is equal to the wholeness of anxiety which runs throughout the novel and which is transmitted to the reader. Both of these experiences are dependent on one another, because they are the expression of the same relation. Transgression generates anxiety and anxiety is what makes transgression possible. The reader's unease is not similar to the protagonists' unease in a distant, unrelated way; it *is* their unease. The effect that this novel has on its reader is indicative of the nature of transgression as an experience that cannot be defined with the recourses of everyday, representative discourse, and as inextricably linked with anxiety as the affect that follows and encompasses it. Just like transgression leads to a placement of the subject beyond itself, similarly, anxiety is of an existential nature, and it corresponds to the depths of one's being.

Story of the Eye ends with the three protagonists who, right after murdering the

[242] Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* p. 67

priest, leave Andalusia disguised, playfully tricking the police. 'On the fourth day, at Gibraltar, the Englishman purchased a yacht, and we set sail towards new adventures with a crew of Negroes'.[243] This is the sentence with which the tale ends. In its simplicity, there is found the disturbing feeling of non-closure; instead of terminating the story, this sentence takes it right back to the beginning, in a circular movement. New adventures await, probably new crimes and new deceits. The tale is left unfinished in this sense, and this implies that anxiety and transgression constitute a problem that cannot be answered, that cannot be overcome. Ecstasy is temporary, it is only grasped for a moment in time, while the anxiety of human existence persists. Transgression is a momentary experience, a glimpse of one's wholeness, and not a permanent situation. Along with the protagonists, the reader is also left in a 'between': without closure, there is no satisfaction that could be found in a definitive ending. The reader's anxiety does not subside, as her reality is not finally restored to its normal, familiar state.

However, it is the limit of literature that can offer a way out and an elimination of the affects that are generated in the reader. After all, one could say that it is only fiction, made up words on a piece of paper, whose effect is always dependent on one's perception and interpretation. By closing a book, one is able to close off the feelings that accompany it. Sailing along with the protagonists towards new adventures, prolonging the anxiety and the need for transgression is a choice, depending on the reading of the novel. The problem of anxiety can be maintained if we consider it as the agent that forces the story to move forward, and as that which manages to bring forth the nature of transgression as a fundamental personal experience.

In Bataille's fictional works, individual 'inner' experience plays a crucial part in illuminating the concept of transgression, which, ultimately, is not merely one that the protagonists experience, but one that the reader carries with her. What is of great

[243] *Ibid.*, p. 67

importance is the fact that what she carries with her is not meaning, not an analysis and interpretation, but the void that the book opens up. This sense of void, or ungroundedness, is a persistent theme in Bataille's fiction, and I would like to discuss it in the next chapter in relation to another novel, *The Blue of Noon,* where once again the narrative and the way it is written have a direct impact on the reader

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Chapter Five: *Blue of Noon*

Blue of Noon was written in 1934 – 35 and published in 1957. In the author's foreword, included in its first publication, Bataille in just a few pages, in fact in a few sentences, provides his readers with the most intimate account of his work as a writer and of the relationship that he feels is established between them and himself: 'how can we linger over books to which their authors have manifestly not been *driven*?'.[244] There is a force that drives the author towards writing, which he calls 'a moment of fury', and which is perceived by the reader as 'trance'. I have discussed the implications of this relationship in the first chapter of this thesis, in relation to the appearance of an impersonal community of readers founded on non-verbal communication, and in this chapter I would like to pursue this issue in the specific context of this fictional work. In the preface of *Blue of Noon* then, the writer writes in fury, the reader reads in trance. The stories, the written body that generates the connection between reader and writer are, however, undoubtedly more closely linked to the writer's part. In fact, Bataille states later in the preface that 'the freakish anomalies of *Blue of Noon* originated entirely in an anguish to which I was prey. These anomalies are the ground of *Blue of Noon*'.[245] This suggests that the drive towards writing consists of something deeply personal, a force that originates in the most intimate psychological, anguished state of the writer, which is moreover compulsive and devoid of any dedication to a useful purpose. The fact of its belated publication seems to reinforce this argument, and makes this novel all the more interesting in connection to the reader/writer relationship. The question that arises in

[244] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 127
[245] *Ibid*., p. 128

this respect concerns the position of the novel before and after its publication, and more specifically, whether it changes from a personal/private status to a common/public one. The question, in other words, is formed thus: does the fact of its publication, its becoming available to the community of readers alter the nature of the novel, and if so in what way?

This question is only part of what makes *Blue of Noon* the novel that it is, whose combination of qualities allow for its nature to be established more fully. To be appreciated in its completeness, the reader must take into account not only the content of the novel but also its structural peculiarities that contribute to the appreciation of its thematics and to its general mood, which, I argue, cannot be pinned down with certainty as it consists of the very fact that *Blue of Noon* moves in a space of vertigo, a space that is not securely grounded but opens channels in between states where the protagonists transfer their experience onto the reader. In this chapter I aim to identify what it is that produces this kind of ungroundedness, which is primarily found through the theoretical views that emerge through the content, but also, on a different level, through the temporality, structure and stylistic peculiarities of its writing.

Bataille includes the preface to *Blue of Noon* in its first publication in 1957. In no more than three pages Bataille manages to transform this piece of writing from something 'he had forgotten its very existence', to a novel, incorporated now in the literary world, occupying a space between classic literary works and described at the back cover of the 2006 Marion Boyars edition as 'one of Bataille's most overly political works, exploring the ambiguity of sex as a subversive force and dissecting the fetishes of violence, power and death that mesmerized an age'. The preface is what gives to *Blue of Noon* the character of a novel. It creates the space that is needed in order for it to exist as a literary work, as if by justifying the events and 'anomalies' that Bataille says lie behind its pages. The gap that exists between the different parts of the novel and

which corresponds to actual, real time separating what is written, is eliminated by the use of the preface, in the sense that it creates a link within temporality, or rather, creates a temporality itself. The importance of the preface is not only manifested in the author's account on writing which helps the reader realise in a way what it is that drives Bataille to write and what creates the sense of 'trance' that the reader finds herself into. What is also extremely important is the temporal framework in which the novel is situated immediately with the inclusion of the preface. *Blue of Noon* was written in different periods in time: the introduction is a modified version of *WC* written in 1928, while Part One is written in 1934 and Part Two in 1935. The dislocation of the three different parts of the book is brought together several years later with the preface in 1957. It seems that the novel has a center from which two streams originate: one going back to the past (1928) and the other heading towards the future (1957). This dispersed temporality corresponds to different periods in Bataille's life as a writer and to the issues that preoccupied him in certain eras. This is also the case in the fictional world of the novel, where the constant sense of being in between, never situated definitively on one side or the other, corresponds to its actual writing process which is also fluctuating from one period to another. This is indicative of Bataille's thinking which is not based on stability but constantly explores themes as they flow into one another.

On his autobiographical note published in *October* Magazine and written in 1958, Bataille states:

> If thought and its expression have become his main area of activity, this has not been without repeated attempts, within the limits of his means, at experiences lacking apparent coherence, but whose very incoherence signifies an effort to comprehend the totality of possibility, or to put it more precisely, to reject, untiringly, any possibility exclusive of others. [...] There is work on Bataille's part,

but it is an effort to escape, an effort of release towards a freedom that is direct.[246]

Bataille's work is an attempt towards the totality of possibility and at this level it requires a thought that is itself coordinated with this totality. What he calls 'lack of apparent coherence' is what is most challenging to him as a writer, as well as to his audience, his readers, but it is precisely that which lies at the foundation of his ideas. To represent the whole by the only means available - that is by a project, writing - in other words, to present a 'project that is not a project' as he states in *Inner Experience*, is a task that does not allow for any space for conventional writing. In the same autobiographical note, he refers to philosophy as 'acrobatics', as it cannot grasp the sovereign existence beyond all means in which he is interested. In philosophy, experience is lacking, and being sovereignly is incomplete without it. I will argue that the flow of objects, places and events in *Blue of Noon* that also leads to this 'apparent incoherence' or ungroudedness, corresponds to the general flow of his thought that is itself vertiginous, in the sense that the totality of possibility Bataille is in search of can only be reached through the exploration of concepts that flow into one another. The mingling of politics with sexuality that lies in the center of *Blue of Noon,* as well as the novel's structure that contributes to the liquidity and disconnections of the novel and its fragmented temporality make it an astounding example of the vertigo that lies at the limit of thought. Bataille's thought is always situated at this limit, where opposites cease to exist as opposites, but allow in their merging for the vertigo to be felt, experienced.

Blue of Noon was written, as Bataille states 'in the blaze of events', situated in a very specific frame in space and time. In this way, it becomes inseparable from the events that it describes, in the same time that it appears to be in a very clear cut position

[246] Georges Bataille, *'*Autobiographical Note'*,* in *October*, Vol. 36, Georges Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing, (Spring 1986), p. 110

in history. Patrick ffrench in his essay 'Dirty Life, London – Paris – Barcelona – Trier – Frankfurt', after offering an account of the most significant dates of the events that marked Europe in the 1930s (from the rise of Hitler in January 1933 to the Spanish civil war in 1936), gives the political setting of *Blue of Noon* as it develops in two interconnected axes: 'the Europe which forms the historical and geographical setting for *Le Bleu du Ciel* is one threatened by the rise of Nazism in Germany, Austria, and the threat of fascism in France and Spain. It also figures a wider political context, a concern with the 'old Europe' of Marx'.[247] The specificity or reality of the places, as well as the figure of Marx, whose shadow is constantly looming in the background of the novel, seem to clash with the dreamy state or 'unreality' of the narrator's personal experience. However, the historical figure of Marx does not escape the fluidity or 'contamination', as ffrench suggests, of the text. Marx's figure is displaced: the bearded, wise head of knowledge that rests on his Highgate Cemetery grave is in direct contrast with the figure of 'dirty little Marx' running in the streets of Trier. 'Dirty' here, echoing Dorothea's shortened name, suggests the contamination of Marx's high, sealed, dead philosophy, by 'low', 'base life'. His philosophy is underground as he is also entombed. Dirty, however, 'from her great height',[248] leans down and makes a horrible face at the little boy. Base life sticks her tongue out to high philosophy. Dirty is able to do that, because unlike Marx, she is not all the way buried in the ground, she is not entombed, closed off, or dead as Marx is. Base life is in accordance with the scene at the graveyard where Troppmann and Dirty make love, where 'they are "half in and half out", at the limit or on the line between life and death, or simulating that liminary position'.[249] They are both dead *and* alive, or rather, they die while living.

This is a problem that has a central place in Bataille's theoretical work, and

[247] Patrick ffrench, 'Dirty Life, London – Paris – Barcelona – Trier – Frankfurt' in *The Beast at Heaven's Gate, Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression,* ed. Andrew Hussey, Rodopi, 2006, p. 62
[248] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 121
[249] ffrench, 'Dirty Life', p. 66

which is illustrated in *Blue of Noon* in the most animated way. This ambiguous position, in between the earth and the sky, or the low and high, underlines the novel and provides it with a quality that informs its main mood. In other words, *Blue of Noon* is a novel that brings together themes that seem to be contradictory, in order to bring out their point of fusion, their inescapable connection. Politics and sexuality are the main axes between which the novel fluctuates. Denis Hollier comments on the simultaneity of the erotic and the political: 'without ever being conflated, they go hand in hand, side by side, one echoing the other'.[250] The novel is written in between dates in its author's life, as it is also laid out between events and cities in its content. In fact, *Blue of Noon* can be said to be a novel that is everywhere and nowhere, precisely because it is always *in between;* and this is not a safe middle ground that allows one to fluctuate from one side to the other, like changing sides on an argument. The middle ground of *Blue of Noon* belongs to the domain of the limit. It is in the middle because it separates two sides but, instead of deriving its existence from this separation, it has an existence of its own: as the limit, as vertigo.

In the fictional world of *Blue of Noon,* the protagonist, Troppmann, narrating in the first person, is always found in between states. Starting with the women with whom he is associated, there is always a conflicting state in which he is lost, with Lazare being the most evident example: he is both fascinated and repulsed by her. As ffrench points out, Lazare's double character reflects the two phases of Marxism outlined by Bataille: one (in Paris) that represents a dead philosophy, buried underground, refusing to dirty itself and the revolution with base materiality and unable to respond to the threat of fascism, and another (in Barcelona) that is dirtied, affected by perverse sexuality, one that is 'closer to an attitude of indifference to the project of revolution and an

[250] Denis Hollier, *Absent Without Leave,* Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 58

indulgence in the violence that it produces'.[251] Even in Paris, Troppmann cannot stay away from this repulsive 'bird of ill omen', as he calls Lazare. He is driven towards her, he has to see her, and even when he avoids her, his thoughts always seem to be occupied with her and her ideas. In Paris he tells Lazare in tears about Dirty, his wife, his necrophilia and the incident with his dead mother, although he refers to her as 'an old woman'.

> I told this virgin the story of my entire life. Me telling it to a girl like her (she was condemned by ugliness to a stern stoicism and could only endure life ludicrously) was so impudent that it made me ashamed. Never before had I told anyone what had happened to me. Each sentence was as humiliating as an act of cowardice.[252]

Troppmann is unable to situate himself firmly on one side. He is fascinated and repulsed by Lazare; he goes so far as to even say that he would kill her on the spot if she was in front him, and yet he craves her company. His ambiguity towards her reflects her own double character as well as the liquidity of people, places and states of the whole novel. As Troppmann oscillates between states, he is not undecided but rather caught in the verge, submerged into ambiguity. The same can be said of his relationship with Xenie, the rich Parisian girl who has a superficial interest in communism and the current political events. Troppmann again is confronted with attraction towards her as well as repulsion, his feelings fluctuating between tenderness and cruelty, even love and hate. If we were to take a psychoanalytic view on this relationship, the concept of *ambivalence* as 'the simultaneous existence of contradictory tendencies, attitudes or feelings in the relationship to a single object – especially the coexistence of love and hate',[253] seems to be fitting in this context. Troppmann's ambivalence towards Lazare or Xenie cannot be

[251] ffrench, 'Dirty Life', p. 70
[252] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 25
[253] Jean Laplanche & Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis,* Karnac, 2006, p. 26

said to be the coexistence of love and hate, for the reason that in Troppmann, nothing co-exists; rather, his contradictory feelings are what situate him right in the middle. He is not experiencing either love or hate depending on the situation, but neither love nor hate. His ambivalence is one that has a value on its own, in other words, it exists as a state in between, not just as a parodic phase that leads from one contradictory affect to another.

Troppmann is constantly in between, in a sort of vertiginous ground, or rather of ungroundedness. This state is described in its physical manifestation when Troppmann is at the beach in Badalona:

> When I stood up, the water came to my stomach. I saw my legs, yellowish in the water, my two feet in the sand, and, out of water, my torso, arms and head. I felt an ironic curiosity in seeing myself – in seeing what this thing was on the surface of the earth or sea, this nearly naked character who was waiting for a plane to emerge several hours from the depths of the sky. I started swimming again. The sky was vast and pure; and, there in the water, I would have liked to laugh.[254]

This theme of being in between, half in and half out is the constant state of the narrator. In Badalona his body is half submerged into the depths of the sea while the other half is exposed to the vast pure sky. His position is that of liminality, neither in nor out, but in that space between the two. What is of interest in this context is that this liminal state is not something that needs to be resolved, but on the contrary, it has to be preserved. At the limit, what differentiates the sky from the earth or the sea is transgressed. The sky becomes the sea and vice versa, in a reversal that is able to illuminate two contradictions at the very point of their abolition. Troppmann is experiencing in his anguish his being at the limit: 'I would have liked to laugh'. This last phrase echoes a

[254] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 98

passage from Bataille's book *Inner Experience* where laughter is equated with communication, the most profound mode of communication, that liberates human life: 'As if this life suddenly passed from an empty and sad solidity to the happy contagion of warmth and of light, to the free tumult which the waters and the air communicate to one another'.[255] In his liminal state, Troppmann finds himself as if from the outside, as a spectator looking at his own being. He is 'this thing on the surface of the earth or sea', waiting for another person, another 'thing'. In the same chapter of *Inner Experience* Bataille writes:

> Shared laughter assumes the absence of anguish, and yet it has no other source than anguish. […] You cannot imagine that, dropped, from you don't know where, into this unknown immensity, abandoned to enigmatic solitude, condemned in the end to sink into suffering, you are not seized with anguish. But from the isolation […] you are free to derive this vertiginous consciousness from what takes place – consciousness, vertigo, which you only reach bound by this anguish.[256]

Troppmann's 'vertiginous consciousness' is found in the liminal state between the earth and sky, where he cannot hold on to anything but his own anguish. The reversal of the earth and sky is also a reversal of his own being and of the being that he awaits to 'emerge from the depths of the sky'. Dirty is the other with whom laughter is shared, communication is established; but again, their union is suspended, they find each other in the liminal space between earth and sky, when they make love half buried inside the soil of the cemetery in Trier. This scene is the culmination of Troppmann's relationship with Dirty. His impotence, persisting from the beginning of the narrative, is resolved only at this point, where the lit candles, these 'funereal stars' cannot be separated from

[255] Bataille, *Inner Experience,* p. 95
[256] *Ibid.* p. 96

the starry sky, and the couple seems to be 'falling in the void of the sky'.[257] Instead of their relationship being resolved in a definitive state, they can only be together in the absolute void; between the earth and sky, at a state of suspension, at the limit of their existence. The image of the 'starry graveyard' eliminates the difference of life and death, at the same time that it illuminates it. At the night of the dead, at the cemetery among graves, it is not death that is celebrated but *life* that *is* death. Eroticism here, takes on its most fundamental meaning: 'assenting to life up to the point of death'.[258] It makes manifest the fundamental truth that brings together life and death in the form of eroticism.

I would like to turn at this point to the introduction of Bataille's book *Eroticism,* in order to clarify the importance of this fictional merging of life and death that takes place with such vividness in *Blue of Noon.* There, Bataille writes: 'Each being is distinct from all others. […] He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity'. And further down: 'None the less, we can experience its dizziness together. It can hypnotise us. This gulf is death in one sense, and death is vertiginous, death is hypnotising'.[259] Troppmann and Dirty are experiencing precisely this vertigo, in the gulf that separates them, at the moment when their union is established. Two beings that are distinct from each other, experience continuity and communication in its most profound, non-verbal state. Vertigo and dizziness represent the strongest mood that runs through the novel, and that accompanies its culminating moments. It is the feeling one gets when confronted with the void, or with nothingness, in the sense that every known objective reality loses its meaning and what is left can only be unknown, outside the realm of reason. Troppmann is no longer 'that thing on the surface of the earth or sea', in Badalona. With Dirty, in the cemetery in Trier he is

[257] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 120
[258] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 11
[259] *Ibid*., pp. 12-13

finally losing himself and nothing can be said anymore of objects; or at least, nothing definitive can be said of objects since everything, at the moment of their union is liquified, things blend and flow into each other. The passage is worth quoting at length:

> Curiously, this empty space, at our feet, was no less infinite than a starry sky over own heads. Flickering in the wind, a multitude of little lights was filling the night with silent, indecipherable celebration. Those stars – those candles – were flaming by the hundred on the ground: ground where ranks of lighted graves were massed. […] We fell onto the shifting ground, and I sank into the moist body the way a well-guided plough sinks into the earth. The earth beneath that body lay open like a grave; her naked cleft lay open to me like a freshly dug grave. We were stunned making love over a starry graveyard. Each of the lights proclaimed a skeleton in its grave, and they thus formed a wavering sky, as unsteady as the motions of our mingled bodies.[260]

In this complex scene images flow into one another in a succession that culminates in the mingling not only of the lovers' bodies but also of everything that surrounds them. The empty space on which they stand and the starry sky above them becomes the combined image of 'funereal stars', where the candles on the graves and the stars are indistinguishable. In this setting of blended earth and sky, Dorothea's body becomes one with the earth beneath her, 'open like a freshly dug grave' in the 'starry graveyard'. Even the use of her full name in this passage instead of 'Dirty', alludes to an association of her nickname with the dirt of the earth that has been now rendered unnecessary. Dorothea is now one with the earth and her nickname seems superfluous. Instead, the use of her real name intensifies the contradiction between Dorothea - the living being touching the sky, and Dorothea - the being buried in a grave inside the earth. Dirty has

[260] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* pp. 119-120

become Dorothea in order to be Dirty completely, in her very existence and not only as a connotation to which her name alludes.

The etymology of her full name is also interesting is this context: Dorothea, from the Greek Δωροθέα (= δώρο θεού), gift of god or gift *to* god. There is an implied sacrifice in her name, either as a gift that god offers, or as a gift offered to god. Dirty's sacredness is inherent in her very being. Like Madame Edwarda, the heroine of Bataille's novel itself titled *Madame Edwarda,* she is God. Madame Edwarda declares that she is God as she exposes her 'old rag and ruin' to the narrator: '"You can see for yourself," she said, "I'm GOD"'.[261] Dirty is God at the moment of sacrifice, when she is no longer a gift from god but a gift to god. The gift from god is defiled, degraded, brought as near to death as possible. The distance between God who is able to offer being as a gift, and the being that should in this sense be grateful to Him is annihilated. There is no high and low anymore, the sacrifice results to a complete reversal that destroys the limits of this distinction. Dorothea, at the moment of her sexual union with Troppmann has become a corpse in a grave, she is sacrificed, in an act of fundamental transgression.

Bataille writes in *Eroticism:* 'It is the common business of sacrifice to bring life and death into harmony, to give death the upsurge of life, life the momentousness and vertigo of death opening on to the unknown. Here life is mingled with death, but simultaneously death is a sign of life, a way into the infinite'.[262] Life is mingled with death in the vertiginous moment of transgression. The earth, the sky and the two bodies are now indistinguishable from one another. As each light proclaims a skeleton in its grave, Dirty too becomes one: '… My skeleton … You're shivering', Troppmann says to her before they begin to slide down the sloping ground. In his discussion of this scene

[261] Bataille, *Madame Edwarda,* p. 150
[262] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 91

Milo Sweedler suggests: 'the scene reads like a metaphorical burial, in which Troppmann assimilates the moist body ("corps humide") of his lover to the cold ground ("terre fraîche") beneath her. The image of the couple defying gravity as they fall into the void is accompanied by a counterimage of the narrator metaphorically thrusting his lover into the grave'.[263] They both defy gravity as they seem to become one with the starry sky above, and also, in the same movement, they are buried into the ground, into the earth below. Above and below are one and the same as they are reversed into each other. The couple is in a liminal state between the earth and sky or life and death, which is exactly where their existence seems to make sense. That is, in *non*-sense, at the limit, half in and half out, where their vertiginous existence is most evident.

This paradoxical state lies at the core of Bataille's thinking. To live while dying, to experience transgression if only for a moment is the key to our being beyond utility, in other words to our escaping the world of work that reduces human life to objects. In *Blue of Noon* excess is always looming through the pages and transgression takes on a character that is 'real', 'lived'. I would like to focus in what follows, on the relationship that is formed in the novel between politics and sexuality, in order to specify if their connection is able to stand as the unifying theme that allows transgression to be seen as a unifying force. In other words, these two axes that from an 'external', objective perspective, seem to be in contradiction to one another, if read in this novel as interconnected in a fundamental way rather that as two separate parts of humanity, can illuminate the nature of experience and its significance for this specific theme. *Blue of Noon* is a work of fiction, and if it is to be categorised, it will certainly fall under a category that touches primarily on Politics and Sexuality. However, this connection is not easy to discern, precisely because the boundaries between the two are not clear. On the contrary, they are purposely (or even unavoidably) obscured to the point that

[263] Milo Sweedler, *The Dismembered Community, Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris, and the Remains of Laure,* University of Delaware Press, 2009, p. 87

separating one from the other is impossible. What lies at the center of the novel is not the effort to distinguish the two and name what it is that connects or divides them, but the fact that this inseparability is on its own the fundamental animating force behind it.

In order to discuss the connection between politics and sexuality, I would like to turn first to the narrative of *Blue of Noon* itself. To begin with, Troppmann's impotence is the most obvious manifestation of the connection between politics and sexuality. He is not only impotent in relation to Dirty, but also in a parallel way, he is impotent politically. He finds himself in the midst of events in Barcelona, and still he is 'unable to muster anything but a touristic interest in the revolutionary action around him'.[264] This 'touristic interest' as Susan Rubin Suleiman very accurately describes it, follows Troppmann as it goes hand in hand with its double: sexual frustration. Sexual and political frustration take the form of one and the same source of anguish. This is most evident in the nightmare that Troppmann has the night after his meeting with Lazare and her stepfather, the philosopher Antoine Melou. Troppmann says of this meeting: 'it was like a nightmare, even more depressing than the dream, which was to take place the following night'.[265] However, when he analyses this dream he completely neglects the significance of the meeting and the political interpretation it gives rise to. Moreover, he only mentions it after the analysis, which he bases on the events that occurred 'the evening at Fred Payne's', as if the meeting did not take place after that and right before the dream. The result is that he gives an Oedipal interpretation of the dream, associating the aggressive and vengeful Minerva with Dirty. This is Troppmann's only comment: 'I quickly grasped that, in this dream, Dirty (now both insane and dead) had assumed the garb and likeness of the *Commendatore.* In this unrecognizable guise, she was rushing

[264] Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Bataille in the Street, The Search for Virility in the 1930s', in *Bataille, Writing the Sacred,* ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill, Routledge, 1995, p. 29
[265] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 45

at me in order to annihilate me'.[266] The political interpretation is suspiciously neglected, and as a result, 'Troppmann avoids having to notice that the virgin goddess who seeks to castrate him evokes the 'dirty virgin' Lazare as much as the sexual, silken Dirty',[267] as Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests. According to this reading, the Oedipal/Don Juan plot that Troppmann exclusively sees is not outstripped by the political one, but it does deny the other story. The privileged psychosexual explanation emphasises the fact of the intentional (though perhaps unconscious) overlooking of the political one.

Throughout the novel, Troppmann's political impotence, expressed in his complete disengagement and apathy towards the events that take place around him, is accompanied by his sexual impotence, which is more straightforward in the sense that he is able to perceive it and respond to the anguish that is its result. To put it differently, the anguish that continuously takes hold of him has as a direct source not only his sexual frustration but also, and equally so, his political frustration.

I would like to turn now to the aspect of liquidity that flows throughout the novel and is depicted most concretely in Troppmann's crying, as well as his being soaked in rain or sea water, in order to identify its significance for the general ungroundedness of the tale. Troppmann's outlet is a violent and often uncontrollable and involuntary burst of tears. *Blue on Noon* is filled with scenes where he is in a hopeless state of crying in spite of himself, and where nothing and no one can put an end to his endless stream of tears. Troppmann's tears, due to their violent uncontrollable nature are more like a force of nature: they stream from his eyes the way rains falls from the sky. They are so excessive that they almost lose their subjective character: they are not Troppmann's tears of sadness or despair, their origin escapes him and they become something almost foreign to him. When Troppmann cries it is as if a

[266] *Ibid*., p. 44
[267] Suleiman, 'Bataille in the Street', p. 31

sort of liquid runs from his eyes which has no connection to his own feelings or state of mind; or rather, his constant state of mind is that of liquidity. From dream to waking life, from sexuality to politics, his anguish is not one that corresponds to a specific reason, but an insistent state that is beyond every reason. He cries when he tells Lazare about his wife and about his relationship with Dirty: 'I spoke in tears. Tears ran down my cheeks and between my lips'.[268] In Paris, everything he does seems to end up in tears: 'I then left the restaurant, convinced of being in a good mood, but as I walked down an empty street, I started sobbing. I couldn't stop sobbing'.[269] Finally, before leaving Lazare and Melou, a meeting that has (unbeknown to him) partly triggered the nightmare he had the same night, he says: 'I understood him. His discouragement was contagious. If I didn't leave, I would soon start crying again'.[270] The section ends with the following passage: 'It was pouring. I was without coat or hat. It seemed to me that I didn't have far to go. I walked for nearly an hour, frozen by the rain that soaked my clothing and hair'.[271] Troppmann is not soaked in tears but in rain, but by now this seems to be one and the same situation: one that corresponds to the liquidity that is Troppmann's mode of being.

In order to pursue the nature of tears further it is useful to turn at this point to a lecture that Bataille gave in 1953 on Un-knowing and its connection with laughter and tears. He suggests: 'There is something intoxicating in tears, as in laughter. […] Tears, more than anything else, mark the disappearance, the sudden destruction of the known universe in which we belong'.[272] Bataille makes clear that his philosophy, if it is to be named as such, is a philosophy of laughter. This means that what drives his thinking is the same force that lies behind the proximity of laughter and tears, the mystery that

[268] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 24
[269] *Ibid*., p. 35
[270] *Ibid.*, p. 50
[271] *Ibid*.
[272] Georges Bataille 'Un-knowing, Laughter and Tears', trans; A. Michelson, in *October*, Vol. 36 (Spring 1986), p. 98.

causes this excess. This is Un-Knowing, being confronted with *nothing,* or living at the limit of the instant where the usefulness of objective reality disappears. Theorising the Un-Knowing is the challenge Bataille faces in every one of his works as he develops a philosophy of laughter, of excess, of non-knowledge. This is what makes the appearance of liquidity in his thought necessary, as the themes he encounters are mingled into each other and their experience becomes as important as their objective, coherent analysis.

Troppmann's liquid state is indicative of the anguish that is brought to the fore with the experience of Un-Knowing. Of course, Troppmann *knows*. He lives and breathes in the world like everyone else, like the readers of *Blue of Noon* and, most importantly, like its writer, Georges Bataille. Troppmann sees, listens, perceives everything that goes on around him, he is aware of the turbulent situation in Barcelona as well as the political connotations of the city of Trier. His touristic interest in politics is the result of his knowledge, of his attachment to the events and facts that he is reluctantly part of. His interaction with objective reality results to his political impotence, and to a sense of futility that is eloquently expressed in the words of Melou, the incarnation of the Marxist revolutionary and 'emblem of some dreadful despair', as he declares that the Communists are like the farmer, who awaits for the storm to come working on his land, and then 'he pointlessly raises his arms to heaven, waiting for the lightning to strike him – him, and his arms…'.[273] Troppmann is touched by this statement. The insistence of futility that Melou had just described struck a chord inside him that is not easily interpreted. In one sense, Troppmann knew that this was the case, his own political opinion seems to be close to Melou's. But the difference lies in the acknowledgement and persistence of the old Communist, who is prepared to die for something he knows has no future. Melou is prepared to face the consequences of his faith to his ideology. Troppmann on the other hand, is indifferent to any ideology, and

[273] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 50

also, to any kind of faith: 'I was jealous of people with a God to hang on to, whereas I … soon all I'd have left would be "eyes to cry with"'.[274] His being is troubled from the very fact that faith is alien to him. The tears that stream from his eyes do not correspond to any attachment to the real world, but to its complete opposite: his tears are a reaction to the lack of anything concrete, to the appearance of the unreal. Melou is attached to life, to discursive, useful, concrete reality, and is able to respond to it humanly, with human passions, despair, endurance. If Melou was to cry for the futility of the communist revolution, his tears would be that of a man who *knows,* who can respond to the troubles of life and reality. Troppmann's anguish is that of a man who faces the un-known. His crying is uncontrollable because as a human being he simply cannot control the force that drives it. When Troppmann faces the limit of excess he is, for an instant, not himself; he is not the man who is concerned with reading the paper or feeding himself or even finding his way to the next brothel. When he no longer *knows,* he no longer cares for the future, but, at this limit of human existence, he is no longer man.

Bataille closed one of his lectures on Un-Knowing in 1951 with these words:

> If I succeed in living within the instant, I break free of all difficulty, but I am no longer a man (to be a man means living in view of the future); and there is no recourse to animality in this situation, which requires a considerable energy available to few. I pass no value judgment. I cannot manage the slightest condemnation of those who know, who live in the world in which I myself live, in which I can no longer live.[275]

These words could have come out of Troppmann's mouth, when he no longer *knows*, in moments when his attachment to the future is lost. He does not really live, except for

[274] *Ibid*., pp. 103, 104
[275] Bataille, 'Un-knowing, Laughter and Tears', pp. 84-5

when he is in that instant. The sense of drifting from anguish to anguish, from one dream to another and from one futile reality to another is interrupted by these moments of excess where he is unable to control his human self; in tears, or in states of complete transgression, like in the culminating scene at the cemetery. However, at the limit where he no longer knows, he is no longer a man, and therefore, the paradox that informs Bataille's thought is seen once again: man is man completely when he is no longer a man. Transgressing the limits of what makes us human is precisely what is necessary, but the price for it is complete detachment from what is known about us and about the world we live in. Knowing is for Troppmann the link to the 'world of politics', as it is also the link to the 'world of lovers', to refer to Bataille's own distinction of the two in his essay 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice'. But, it is precisely this knowledge that he seeks to destroy, and he manages to do so towards the end, when finally, under the starry sky, after a series of childhood memories evoking the brilliance of the sun as a butcher's van drives past in front of him, he loses his head under the blinding sun. The passage is worth quoting at length:

> My eyes were no longer lost among the stars that were shining above me actually, but in the blue of the noon sky. I shut them so as to lose myself in that bright blueness. From it, fat black insects spouted forth in buzzing swarms: just as, next day, there would emerge at the blazing high point of the day, at first as an imperceptible speck, the plane that was bringing Dorothea . . . I opened my eyes. The stars were still covering my head, but I was maddened with sunlight. […] I had laughed the same laugh as a child, convinced that one day, since such a lucky insolence was sustaining me, it was I who was bound to turn the world upside down – turn the world, quite ineluctably, upside down.[276]

[276] Bataille, *Blue of Noon*, p. 88

In this crucial passage everything is brought together under the brilliance of the sun. What is more important is that Troppmann is actually standing under the starry sky, yet what maddens him is the sunlight of the blue sky. He has managed to turn the world upside down, by losing himself in the blue of noon. His memories are mingled with his waking state, the sun takes the place of the dark starry sky, the insects are compared to the plane that will bring Dirty close to him, and she assumes the characteristics of 'an impossible, adorable, "outhouse fly"'.[277] His concern with politics is also evident in the passage when he acknowledges his hopeless situation, being in a foreign city waiting for 'some unknown, impossible event', that would certainly drive him in the streets the next day. In fact, his anxiety about the political events about to take place as soon as the night is over, is what triggers his childhood memory of the butcher's van that is followed by the sun's association with blood and murder: '[t]he sun was fantastic – it evoked dreams of explosion. Was there anything more sunlike than red blood running over cobblestones, as though light could shatter and kill?'.[278] This realisation leads to his being in the middle of the night drunk with light, his fear of Lazare disappearing, and to his reaching the maddening state quoted above.

The blue of noon annihilates difference, in a complete turning of everything upside down. The murderous sun in the darkness of the sky gives rise to this flip, where boundaries are destroyed to reveal a fundamental unification. The sun's association with death is crucial in understanding what it is that strikes Troppmann and has this exhilarating effect on him. His tears, his laughter, his anxiety that has taken over his whole life is the result of his breaking free from the world that can be sustained only at the negation of death. When he looks at death in the eye, when he faces the brilliance of the sun in all its murderous glory, the world is no longer divided into different

[277] *Ibid*.
[278] *Ibid*. p. 87

categories. The political, the sexual, the public, social and private are no longer distinguished from one another. Recognising the power and attraction of death is what allows Troppmann to really *know,* that is, to know *without knowing.* This is the other paradox that informs not only the novel but also Bataille's work in its wholeness. The unifying effect of transgression stems from the fact that in letting go of utility and of the concern for the future, living becomes living in the instant, where there is no measure on which to attach different values. This means that sexuality and politics are equal sources of anxiety, equal opportunities for laughter or for tears. To be fully understood, in that Bataillean 'un-knowing' way, they both have to be seen under the blinding sun, a sun that is maddening even in the dark starry sky, because this reversal is an intrinsic part of its authority, that is an 'authority that expiates itself'.[279] Experience is what is common to both politics and sexuality. Taken as the sole authority, experience annihilates the limits of every difference as it annihilates its own limits. Troppmann in one single moment finally *un*-knows, and this is in complete contrast to his previous state of indifference. In one sense, he is still disengaged as he was before, only at this moment of exhilaration, he is able to place the two states that disturb him under the same scope, and that is nothing less than his own, whole, complete existence. He is himself unified, as is everything around him and laughter is the only adequate response to a world that has been turned upside down. Unlike Melou, he does not await patiently for lightning to strike but he partakes in the upcoming disaster, and this is liberating as it is devastating.

I would like to turn now to Leo Bersani's book *The Culture of Redemption* in order to investigate Bataille's engagement with politics in the context of a fictional work like *Blue of Noon.* Bersani suggests that Bataille's 'non-redemptive art' does not wish to rectify our position in history and the monstrosities that take place in spite of

[279] Bataille, *Inner Experience,* p. 7

ourselves, but on the contrary, shows that we are implicated in them in the most fundamental way: 'In its avoidance of this reifying seriousness about History and Politics, Bataille's art of vertiginous replications is designed to make us feel that we are already everywhere in history, and that an ethos of political engagement is grounded in the illusion that we have not produced the violence against which we struggle'.[280] Not assuming responsibility for the violence that is inherent in human beings and more importantly projected onto the historical and political facts that are shaped alongside human life is what creates the illusion of political ethos. Troppmann's disengagement with politics then becomes, paradoxically, the only honest way of engaging with the dark period of history that he is necessarily part of. Active engagement, the way of Melou or Lazare, is from this point of view a denial of the recognition of the most important given in life: that man's nature is implicated in a fundamental way in all the monstrosities that he struggles to deny, or defeat. From this, it is easier to deduct the connection between politics and sexuality, since at their very core they both stem from the same driving force, the human condition in all its absurdity.

When Troppmann refers to the infinity of the stars as absurd, and even more so, as 'absurd enough to make you scream; but is was a hostile absurdity',[281] he sees himself as a being which is in opposition to the universe, with his sense of usefulness and his way of understanding everything around him in direct contrast to this infinity. The answer to his estrangement is not a transcendental moment where he finally 'reaches' the sky, the highest point of the heavens or the stars, but rather the opposite. He does not transcend himself to a higher level but on the contrary, everything high becomes low, in a complete reversal. When the darkness of the night is turned into the blueness of the noon sky, there is no absurdity but compliance with the universe.

[280] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption,* Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 120
[281] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 87

Troppmann does not unlock the mysteries of this absurd infinity but rather succumbs to his being part of it. His tormenting reality of political and sexual anxiety is part of the reversal, part of his whole being. Bersani comments: 'it is as if human life were a kind of continuum in which Troppmann and Dirty having sex above a cemetery repeats both something as private as Troppmann's dream, elsewhere in the novel, of everything he has loved in his life rising like a cemetery that is also a brothel, […] and something as public as Dolfuss' assassination in Vienna and the workers' uprising in Barcelona'.[282] These events are repeated because as disparate as they seem under an ordinary scope, when placed under the maddening sunlight of the blue sky, they are all outcomes of the same fundamental violence: the murdering violence that belongs to the sun as well as to every human being.

This realisation, nevertheless, is evident to the reader (and to the protagonist) only at moments of extreme excess. The fluidity of the novel, the repetitions of certain themes - solarity being among the most striking – and the protagonist's constant liquid state, take on their meaning at these instants of excess. It is as if Troppmann's experience, when he reaches non-knowledge, is transferred onto the reader who in turn experiences excess in a similar way. I will argue that the protagonist's transgressive moments, his experience of excess, is also the reader's experience, and this is the reason why *Blue of Noon* is one of those stories 'read sometimes in trance'.[283] The reader always exists in a parallel way, alongside the protagonist, either engaging or not engaging with the story. In the case of this novel, the 'parallel universe' of the reader plays a major part in the novel itself, for the following reason: it is *experience* that informs the story, that leads Troppmann to some sort of resolving of his anxious state (although there is no closure in *Blue of Noon),* and it is experience too that is transferred

[282] Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption,* pp. 117-18
[283] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 127

onto the reader, if she is to engage with the novel. In other words, experience provides, on the one hand, the liminal space in which the tale unfolds and in which the protagonist can live in the moment, and on the other, it is experience that is communicated, through the novel's pages to the reader, to the recipient of Bataille's ideas. Troppmann and the reader go through the same journey of frustration that only takes on meaning in *un*-knowing. Disengagement never turns into engagement for neither Troppmann nor the reader; it turns, through experience, into non-knowledge, which is unresolvable and fundamentally contradictory to the concept of engagement.

The lack of closure as well as the unresolved sense of anxiety that flows throughout the novel up until its last scene is, finally, what animates *Blue of Noon* and what provides it with a certain theoretical value. The 'fall upwards' that occurs in the scene of the cemetery is the animation of experience and a description of something otherwise indescribable. Bataille in this novel manages to present a discursive platform for a theory that is in its core non-discursive. Troppmann lives in a fictional world that allows him to fluctuate in the middle, in between states, always at the limit. What Bataille struggles to theorise, his protagonist experiences; and what it actually is, is precisely the lack of closure. Troppmann cannot make a definitive choice between politics and sex, or between the darkness or brightness of the sky. He is always in between, in a state of flowing that *is* his liminal situation. Ambiguity is not something that needs to be resolved but a state that has to be maintained despite its distressing nature. The 'in between' of *Blue of Noon* has the character of a force that needs to be maintained. This liminality is a state that is produced in the reader. Not only in the events that occur in the fictional world of the novel but also as the affect that is produced; that of leaving the reader 'hanging' over the void with nothing to hold on to.

In this instance it is useful to take a look at the final scene of the novel where Troppmann accompanies Dirty to the train station in Frankfurt from where she is to

depart, and he is left alone on the platform: 'the final minutes, on the platform, were unbearable. I didn't have the courage to go away. I was to see her several days later, but I was possessed. I kept thinking that before then she would die. She disappeared with the train'.[284] He is left standing in the pouring rain, himself crying, when he encounters the bizarre spectacle of the young Nazi choir, whose hypnotising effect drives him to stop crying, take shelter from the rain and watch the Nazi youth in all their ferocious yet comical glory. Their description is comical and their leader, who keeps time with the drum stick is portrayed as 'a degenerately skinny kid with the sulky face of a fish'.[285] His drum stick is compared to 'a monstrous monkey's penis' that 'like a dirty little brute he would then jerk [...] with his mouth; from crotch to mouth, from mouth to crotch, each rise and fall jerking to a grinding salvo of the drums'.[286] However, the obscenity of this sight is terrifying, as Troppmann finally faces what up to now was only a threat, or a shapeless idea. These 'children's army in battle order' were the concrete, real-life face of Nazism, that was about to take over Europe, in flesh and blood, not in the symbolic form of nightmares or in the allegorical stories of Melou.

Fascism has the face of an obscene parade of Nazi boys: 'They were motionless, none the less, but in trance. I saw them, so near me, entranced by a longing to meet their death. Hallucinated by the endless fields where they would one day advance, laughing in the sunlight, leaving the dead and the dying behind them'.[287] This final sentence cannot help but echo another one, earlier in the novel when Troppmann is drunk with sunlight under the starry sky, after bringing back memories of himself as a child watching the butcher's van in the streets of Paris. We have already suggested that the murderous sun is the transgressive force that places Troppmann in accordance with the violence of the universe, in a reversal that makes manifest the continuity of existence in

[284] *Ibid*., p. 124
[285] *Ibid*., p. 125
[286] *Ibid.*, pp. 125-26
[287] *Ibid*., p. 126

the face of death. The final sentence of the passage that is of importance here is the following: 'I had laughed the same laugh as a child, convinced that one day, since such a lucky insolence was sustaining me, it was I who was bound to turn the world upside down – turn the world, quite ineluctably, upside down'.[288] Troppmann imagines the Nazi boys, one day, laughing in the sunlight entranced by a monstrous satisfaction caused by murder. In comparison to the earlier scene, Troppmann is now laughing drunk with sunlight, as he did as a child, convinced that he would one day turn the world upside down. The similarities are evident but there remains the need to clarify what it is that connects as well as separates the two scenes.

In both cases the solar element is decisive, as is laughter, the state of trance and the 'smell of death' to use a phrase that Bataille alludes to in his essay 'The Language of Flowers'.[289] It is death that is the hallucinating force driving the Nazi youth, death to which they themselves are driven and also death that they will cause to others. This is a real, concrete situation, since they are destined to obey the predicaments of war, following the fascist ideology of which they are the incarnation. Troppmann, on the other hand, is entranced by the murderous sun, death is also within him, but this fascination is caused by a reversal of all values that places him in accordance with the world around him. His violence meets the violence of the universe in a world that has been turned upside down by him, by his own sovereign laughter, whereas the Nazi youth lacking the exhilarating self-consciousness of transgression seem to be merely the murderous incarnation of the fascist authority. The crucial difference seems to be this self-consciousness that is inherent in experience, in what Troppmann finds himself into, at the limit of his existence, contrary to the Nazi youth whose trance is guided by an authority that remains such, that does not expiate itself but rather establishes itself as

[288] *Ibid*., p. 88
[289] Bataille, 'The Language of Flowers', in *Visions of Excess,* p. 13

authority all the more.

Troppmann is at once attracted and repulsed by this Nazi parade, and this seems to be in accordance with the flow of the novel, which is always in this state of ambiguity. The comic description of the young leader does not efface the hypnotising effect that is exerted upon him by the 'magnificent sound', 'ear-rending in its exultation',[290] that even stops his otherwise uncontrollable crying. When it comes to the actual confrontation of fascism, Troppmann is forced, not by some authority but as a natural reaction to his surroundings, to take a stand. The indifference he has presented up to now takes on another meaning: he is for the first time reacting to the political events which he calls 'a catastrophe'.

> Against the rising tide of murder, far more incisive than life (because blood is more resplendent in death than in life), it will be impossible to set anything than trivialities – the comic entreaties of old ladies. All things were surely doomed to conflagration, a mingling of flame and thunder, as pale as burning sulphur when it chokes you. Inordinate laughter was making my head spin. As I found myself confronting this catastrophe, I was filled with the black irony that accompanies the moments of seizure when no one can help screaming.[291]

Black irony is what fills Troppmann, in the face of the rising tide of murder, of the rising fascism. ffrench notes how this response to fascism in *Blue of Noon* signals the question that will shape Bataille's thought during *Acéphale*, the *College of Sociology* and books written during the war such as *Inner Experience*. With Communism being unable to stop or even to properly respond to fascism's rise in Europe, the situation is now one of either tragedy, or black irony: '[…] if tragedy implies a sympathetic identification with the victim, and to that extent a kind of complicity with the power that

[290] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 125
[291] *Ibid*., p. 126

kills, that sacrifices, irony sees sacrifice as mutilation, or as comedy, is detached, indifferent. Tragic complicity which leads one to say 'Je suis moi-même la guerre', or indifferent, yet analytic comedy?'.[292] Complicity is absent for the fascist; he is, as Hollier suggests, an 'executioner, a technician who inflicts death without risking death himself'.[293] The absence of the sacred in this sacrifice reduces the latter to mere murder, while it also illuminates Troppmann's contrasting position. His relationship with death is precisely one of complicity, he is inseparable from the murderous sun, and he is indistinguishable from Dirty, his 'sunlike skeleton' as they both lay half buried in the cemetery in Trier. His whole existence makes sense only in the attunement of his own violence with the violence that surrounds him.

Blue of Noon ends with these sentences: 'The music ended; the rain had stopped. I slowly returned to the station. The train was assembled. For a while I walked up and down the platform before entering a compartment. The train lost no time in departing'.[294] These last rapid sentences come after the pessimistic, one could say, realisation of the rise of fascism and the black irony that seems to be its only proper respond, somehow confirming this inevitable outcome. The image of the Nazi parade disappearing, the rain stopping and Troppmann leaving the scene does not have the reassuring effect of a definite ending to the story. On the contrary, there is a strong sense of non-closure that is still persistent, and that is reinforced by those seemingly concluding images. The novel is from beginning to end in a state of in between, and this is not resolved even in its final scene. What needs to be retained is not so much the sense of pessimism for a world that is doomed to fall into the dark period of fascism, but the underlying fluidity that has still not dissolved, and that takes on quite clearly a significance of its own: politics and sexuality cannot be divided, as they are both

[292] ffrench, 'Dirty Life', p. 72
[293] Hollier, *Absent Without Leave,* p. 87
[294] Bataille, *Blue of Noon,* p. 126

fundamental parts of human existence. Troppmann is the character on which this is projected, his experience being the unifying experience of non-knowledge. The limits of his being are transgressed to reveal a continuity that forces everything to be seen *at the limit.* In this sense, *Blue of Noon* is the novel that makes manifest the nature of transgression as unifying or totalising.

As is the case with most of Bataille's fictional works, *Blue of Noon* has to be read in way that takes into account all of its aspects. Apart from the *récit*, mainly unfolded in Part Two of the book, that provides it with a more or less solid story that illuminates the philosophical ideas looming behind it, its structure, chronology and layout consist of a major contribution to its reading. In this case, the bizarre structure of the novel is indicative of the general disconnection and fluidity that runs throughout the pages as well as the almost impossible effort to pin it down and define it as a book about something *specific*. Part Two, with its own fragmented structure can lead the reader to a formation of a false sense of unity; false in the sense that the book conveniently begins with the first chapter ('The Evil Omen') and ends with the last one ('The Feast of the Dead'). However, the reader is always confronted with the fact that there is the Introduction, a section that has nothing in common with the ordinary, literary use of an introduction, and also Part One, a strange piece written completely in italics, that consists of one single page. Bersani refers to this section as an 'italicized interlude'[295] that serves as the main indicator of the novel's thematic center, which is the subversion of the legendary use of the Commander/father, a recurring figure throughout the novel, as a punishment for Don Juan's erotic sins. However, regarding Part One, he also writes: 'The more we talk about Part One, the less we are able to make sense of it'.[296] This sentence sums up what, I argue, lies at the core of *Blue of Noon,* that

[295] Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption,* p. 112
[296] *Ibid.*

is, the fact that behind the strong symbolic images, repetitions and analogies that make up the content of the novel, providing a thematic center that illuminates Bataille's ideas and philosophy, there exists a disconnection that is in itself extremely important. This should not be seen as 'an easy way out' for the reader who could, with that in mind, give up on trying to interpret the pages of *Blue of Noon,* but as an indicator and guide towards a reading that benefits this interpretation more than it obscures it. We find here, another aspect of the several paradoxes that inform Bataille's work, which suggests that *non*-sense is the model for its deciphering. Its fragmented structure is in accordance with the book's content, which is, stripped to its foundation, itself a vertiginous experience, ungroundedness, reversal.

Blue of Noon seen as a whole, consists of several dislocations that are structural, temporal as well as thematic. In the same way that the content makes manifest that which underlies the imagery and the written words as a sense of vertigo, its fragmented structure and chronology also illustrate the importance of this slipping from one theme to another. Transgression, in accordance with its theoretical presentation, makes its appearance as a flash; as that which *is* for a moment, in experience, at the limit where knowledge breaks down. For this to be achieved in the form of a literary project, everything has to be taken into account, that is, not only its content but also its structural peculiarities. It is at the limit that transgression manifests itself, and this implies not only the need for a way of writing that allows for a space in between, from which it can emerge, but also a corpus that creates the concrete discursive space for it. Transgression emerges from the pages quite literally, as it makes its way through the content as well as the structure, the length of the sections and the format of the written words. All of this is imperative for the understanding, or rather, the *un*-knowing of Troppmann's experience. As a work of fiction, *Blue of Noon* has the advantage of being able to transfer to the reader precisely that: experience; and this is something that can only emerge from a

number of circumstances, that is, its transgressive content in combination with its structure and chronology. Experience as *un*-knowing will be the main focus of my next chapter, with the consideration of *Madame Edwarda*, in an attempt to further investigate the appearance of excess in Bataille's fiction as well as the effect that is has on its reading.

Chapter Six: *Madame Edwarda*

Georges Bataille has said of *Madame Edwarda* in *Inner Experience* that 'the two texts, to my way of thinking, are very closely linked and one cannot understand one without the other […]'.[297] It is interesting that *Madame Edwarda* is cited in this book as a means for *understanding* inner experience; the latter, as the author is at pains to explain, is something that occupies the sphere of non-knowledge, and although it can and must be communicated, this has to be accomplished in a way that remains faithful to its nature as non-project. Bataille states in obtrusive, capital letters, that 'NON-KNOWLEDGE LAYS BARE', that it 'COMMUNICATES ECSTASY', and that it is 'ANGUISH before all else'.[298] In this passage from *Inner Experience* Bataille offers something like a definition of non-knowledge, or rather a method for its 'attainment', which is useful in understanding the link between what is known and what is 'un-known', between sense and non-sense. This is what he writes:

> This proposition is the summit, but must be understood in this way: lays bare, therefore *I see* what knowledge was hiding up to that point, but if I see, *I know.* Indeed, I know, but non-knowledge again lays bare what I have known. If nonsense is sense, the sense which is nonsense is lost, becomes nonsense once again (without possible end).[299]

This suggests that there are two stages of non-knowledge: first, by laying bare or

[297] Bataille, *Inner Experience,* p. 168
[298] *Ibid*., p. 52
[299] *Ibid*.

'denuding', things are finally seen, understood, known. There is no way around this, for seeing is knowing. Knowledge conceals, but even when meaning is annihilated and what is there is unveiled, this is still something to be known. Therefore, 'nonsense is sense', once again veiled under meaning. However, in the second stage of this process, 'the sense which is nonsense, becomes nonsense once again', in a way that what is left is the impossible, non-knowledge. This is the summit where no point of reference can be found, and where meaning is no longer unveiled but diminished alltogether. At this extreme level there is nothing to communicate other than ecstasy, and indeed, the communication that Bataille talks about is found necessarily beyond oneself. The sentence 'non-knowledge communicates ecstasy' is extremely precise in its simplicity, for it clarifies that: a) non-knowledge, because of the prefix 'non', is beyond anything that can be given meaning, that can be discovered and understood and therefore communicated in any traditional way, and b) due to the fact that it is beyond meaning, the only thing that it can communicate is ecstasy, the state of being beyond reason, beyond meaning and understanding. This also implies that non-knowledge *is* communication, since the latter can only take place after everything has been denuded. Bataille writes in the same passage: 'Obviously, ecstasy is *grasped knowledge* above all else, in particular in the extreme surrender [dénuement] and the extreme construction of the surrender which I, my life and my written work represent (this I know: no one has ever taken knowledge as far, no one has been able to do so; but for me, it was easy – obligatory)'.[300] The writer of non-knowledge has to be himself immersed in it. One cannot, he claims, write about this from the outside, and this is what complicates things: for him, to reach the extreme level of non-knowledge was easy, even obligatory, but to communicate this state is what constitutes the challenge, or 'the torment', as is the second part of *Inner Experience* titled, the one that as he says in the preface, was written

[300] *Ibid*.

'with necessity', in accord with his life.[301] His life and work, then, is communication, it is the laying bare of meaning and then pushing it to the limit where meaning vanishes. It is ecstasy that Bataille communicates, and this is accomplished through his work, seen as a whole, in its various manifestations that range from theory to fiction, but that always involve the reader into the challenge that he himself faces: that through her reading communication is attained, in the sense that meaning constantly goes through the process of non-knowledge, affirming each time that non-knowledge lays bare.

In this chapter I will argue that *Madame Edwarda* is a text that manages via its narrative, but also, on a parallel level via its meta-narrative, to involve the reader in the protagonist's experience, echoing in this way Bataille's account of the latter in *Inner Experience*; this experience is, in other words, a movement from knowledge to non-knowledge which has the final say both in the events that are being narrated, as well as in the relationship between the narrator and the reader, which is formed after the event. *Madame Edwarda* is a text where non-sense is being written, and consequently, non-sense is being read. For this to become evident, I will take into account the narrative itself but also the position that its preface holds, along with the issue of the different ways of its reading. Once again, the reader holds the privileged position of completing the text, which, as I will argue, is the same as leaving the text open, refusing a definitive solution, accepting non-closure instead of an ending.

Madame Edwarda has a privileged position in Bataille's life and work not only because of its apparent connection to Bataille's theory (apart from its citation in *Inner Experience,* its preface is also included as the last chapter of the second part of *Eroticism*) but also as a separate work of fiction. In the preface written under his own name, Bataille states: 'the author of this book has himself insisted upon the gravity of

[301] *Ibid*., p. xxxi

whatever he has to say'.[302] This is the very first sentence of the preface, and as such it sets up the problematic of the novel, which opens up to (at least) two axes. First of all, when Bataille refers to the author of this book, his claim is not self-referential but points to his literary alter ego, Pierre Angélique, who is the credited author of *Madame Edwarda.* Bataille's use of pseudonyms cannot be taken lightly, as they are themselves major part of his thought, contributing to its reading and understanding. The issue of authorship is itself important, especially in connection to the tale, which includes short bracketed pieces of the author's thoughts *as he writes*, adding another level to the narrative; I will refer to this level as the meta-narrative and its importance will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter. Bataille, by distancing himself from the story in signing the preface and acknowledging the existence of another author, Pierre Angélique, who is included in the story itself, creates another dimension, another relationship that is no less important than the relationships unfolded in the story.

On another level, the preface written by Bataille, informs the content of the story, sets up from the very beginning its general problematic, or its 'secret': that 'joy is the same thing as suffering, the same thing as dying, as death'.[303] It is clear that this is a novel whose content is not straightforward but has the qualities of a secret, that has to be unveiled, or shared, but never completely understood. This is emphasised not only in the preface, but also in the bracketed paragraphs written by Pierre Angélique, the figure of the author, who is nevertheless, himself part of the fiction. At this point, it is useful to return to the novel's connection with *Inner Experience,* for what the novel claims to do is *to lay bare,* to denude, in anguish; this is to say that it is non-knowledge that operates throughout the tale, and that finally, it is nudity that leads to ecstasy, to communication that surpasses the field of literature. In other words, reading *Madame Edwarda* with this

[302] Georges Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man,* Marion Boyars, 2003, p. 137
[303] *Ibid*., p. 139

principle in mind brings the reader closer to the author, to his life and his work, as it opens up the space where communication is ecstasy, beyond meaning and understanding. Furthermore, the strong images and contradictions that are depicted throughout the pages of *Madame Edwarda,* the use of light and darkness, noise and silence, the architectural motives that create the image of the city of Paris contrasted to the recurring theme of the empty starry sky above it, are read in harmony with the breaking of the *récit* and the philosophical nature of the preface. *Madame Edwarda* provides us with a presentation of Bataille's most striking ideas, and this includes the fact that in the Bataillean universe, fluidity and fragmentation are not systemic disadvantages, but rather complement his 'unfinished system of nonknowledge', to recall the title of the book edited by Stuart Kendall which aims at exactly that: the presentation of Bataille's 'system against system.'

Madame Edwarda, like all of Bataille's fiction is demanding of its reader. Its author interferes with the classical reader/writer relationship in an urge for a certain attitude towards his novel: that she should keep in mind that this is a reading which demands the same attention towards both fiction and theory. The book, from the very first sentence of the preface to the last passage of the tale, deals with two equally important issues: the author's anguished experience of the events that take place on the one hand, and his desperate attempt to put them into words, to provide them with form in the discursive world where he is posited as an author, after his experience has subsided. The reader therefore, constantly faces the author's pledge to adopt a certain position, and one that is similar to the transgressive state in which the author/protagonist finds himself. She is urged to look beyond the meaning of the words that are being written and ultimately, surrender to their non-meaning.

I would like to look more closely at this point at the issue of reading Bataille in general and *Madame Edwarda* specifically, for it constitutes an ongoing issue that is of

great importance for my thesis' argument as well as for this chapter in particular. Susan Rubin Suleiman in her essay 'Pornography, Transgression and the Avant-Garde: Bataille's Story of the Eye', discusses the two different readings that Bataille's fiction usually triggers: the *textual*, with the critics averting their gaze from the scenes and characters of the novels, and the *ultrathematic*, which fixes its gaze on precisely that, reducing the text to mere pornography. Suleiman uses Andrea Dworkin's feminist reading of *Story of the Eye* to demonstrate how it can flatten the text, stripping it of its connection to Bataille's other fictional as well as theoretical texts, an approach that ignores the fact that fiction reinforces theory and vice versa. This ultrathematic reading is opposed to the one offered by textual critics such as Derrida and Barthes who, in a completely different take ignore the representational (textual as well as visual) transgression that the novel offers and focus on the discursive rules subverted in Bataille's writing. As a conclusion, she suggests that 'a feminist reading of Bataille's and other modern male writers' pornographic fictions must seek to avoid both the blindness of the textual reading, which sees nothing but *écriture,* and the blindness of the ultrathematic reading which sees nothing but the scene and the characters'.[304]

This essay, though mainly discussing *Story of the Eye* and the impact that such readings have on this novel, is extremely useful in perceiving the totality of Bataille's fiction, and *Madame Edwarda* in particular, as a text that incorporates the conditions for being reduced to either cheap pornography, or to pure, transgressive *écriture.* I would like to pursue Suleiman's argument further, in relation to the reading of *Madame Edwarda,* and especially in the English speaking world, having as a source the Marion Boyars edition with the text translated by Austryn Wainhouse. What is interesting about this most widely circulated translation, is the fact that its fluidity is maintained at the

[304] Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Pornography, Transgression, and the Avant-Garde: Bataille's *Story of the Eye'*, in *The Poetics of Gender,* ed. Nancy K. Miller, columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 129, 130

price of unfaithfulness to the original text, something that is indicative of a specific attitude towards this text, which is shaping its perception as a novel as well as a work that is part of Bataille's philosophical thought. As an example of this translative freedom I will quote in full one of the five bracketed passages of *Madame Edwarda,* in its original form, as well as its translation by Austryn Wainhouse. These passages break the course of the *récit* in order to introduce the first person perspective of its author, Pierre Angélique, as he writes after the event, in a different timeframe, one that happens *here and now* at the exact moment he puts his experience into words. The importance of these small bracketed interventions will be discussed later in the chapter.

> (Il est décevant, s'il me faut ici me dénuder, de jouer des mots, d'emprunter la lenteur des phrases. Si personne ne réduit à la nudité ce que je dis, retirant le vêtement et la forme, j'écris en vain. (Aussi bien, je le sais déjà, mon effort est désespéré: l'éclair qui m'éblouit – et qui me foudroie – n'aura sans doute rendu aveugles que mes yeux.) Cependant Madame Edwarda n'est pas le fantôme d'un rêve, ses sueurs ont trempé mon mouchoir: à ce point où, conduit par elle, je parvins, à mon tour, je voudrais conduire. Ce livre a son secret, je dois le taire: il est plus loin que tous les mots.)[305]

> (If you have to lay yourself bare, then you cannot play with words, trifle with slow-marching sentences. Should no one unclothe what I have said, I shall have written in vain. Edwarda is no dream's airy invention, the real sweat of her body soaked my handkerchief, so real was she that, led on by her, I came to want to do the leading in my turn. This book has its secret, I may not disclose it. Now more words.)[306]

In addition to the Austryn Wainhouse translation, I would like to also include one by

[305] Georges Bataille, *Madame Edwarda, Le Mort, Histoire de l'œil,* Pauvert, 1967, pp. 48 - 49
[306] Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man,* p. 156

Simon Elmer, which is evidently more faithful to the original text:

> (Since it is necessary to lay myself bare here, it would be deceiving to play with words, to borrow the clumsiness of phrases. If no-one strips back what I say to its naked state, removing the dress and form, I shall have written in vain. It's just as well, as I've already said, that my effort is hopeless, or the light that dazzles me – which strikes me – would only have blinded my eyes. Madame Edwarda is not the phantom of a dream; the sweat of her body soaked my handkerchief: and to the point where, led by her, I arrived, I would like, in my turn, to lead you. This book has its secret: I cannot reveal it but it is far from all words.)[307]

This particular passage is extremely important for a number of reasons: first of all, we should consider its value purely in relation to the tale itself, and its position amongst the events that are being unfolded. The scene that precedes this passage describes Madame Edwarda's violent crisis and, in more detail, the narrator's own response to it, after him realising that 'She had not lied, that She was GOD'.[308] His state is that of a condemned man awaiting death, a man that is cast to a 'beyond', outside himself, in a vertiginous sliding ('le glissement vertigineux').[309] A condemned man, the narrator tells us, 'when after long hours of waiting he arrives in broad daylight at the exact spot the horror is to be wrought, observes the preparations, […] every object, every face is clad in weightiest meaning and helps tighten the vice whence there is no time left him [*sic*] to escape'.[310] He enters a similar state of absorption but one that does not enclose him. On the contrary, what occurs is a losing of himself in indifference: he is not enclosed but liberated in his anguish, from the objects that have a meaning only in

[307] Georges Bataille, *Madame Edwarda,* in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (September 2009), https://thesorcerersapprenticeonline.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/no-18-madame-edwarda.pdf, p. 14
[308] Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, p. 152
[309] Bataille, *Madame Edwarda*, Pauvert, p. 48
[310] Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man,* p. 155

so far that one is attached to them with a sense of utility, with concern for the future. Sentenced to death, he does not hold on to the life that he knows is going to end, but realises what Bataille in his preface declares to be this book's secret: that life is the same thing as death.

The scene ends with the following sentence: 'The vertiginous sliding which was tipping me into ruin had opened up a prospect of indifference, of concerns, of desires there was no longer any question: at this point, the fever's desiccating ecstasy was issuing out of my utter inability to check myself'.[311] The narrator's entranced state then, is interrupted by a violent return to his concrete, 'real' state. Temporality is restored as he is placed into a timeframe that can be measured, that complies with the rules of everyday life: he is now the man that, we can imagine, sits on his desk with ink and paper in front of him, recording an experience that belongs to the past. Experience is something that has happened, and therefore its transformation into words always entails its necessary framing, and altering of its temporality. *What is happening* becomes *what has happened* when put into words and sentences. The narrator's indifference at his moment of trance is now replaced by a sudden plunge back into his engagement with everyday life, with objects, faces. However, what has to be constantly taken into consideration is the fact that the author's interventions are part of the story itself. *Madame Edwarda* is, along with the tale of the narrator's nocturnal experience in the city of Paris, also a tale of the narrator's equally anguished attempt to describe and narrate this experience. This contrast between the narrator experiencing and his narrating his experience contributes to marking the difference between his state of excess as opposed to a 'normal' state, therefore highlighting what it is that makes the writing of the book worthwhile, even necessary. It is only in its nakedness that what is written has any value. The reader must look beyond the words, she must unclothe what

[311] *Ibid*., p. 156

is being written in order to reach the secret, which is far from all words ('il est plus loin que tous les mots').

That this secret is far from all words lies at the very core of *Madame Edwarda.* It is the key to establishing a connection between the *récit* and its preface, and therefore between Pierre Angélique and Bataille, between fiction and theory. 'More words' is all the reader is getting, as Austryn Wainhouse's translation states, and this is not only inevitable but also necessary. Words are there in place of experience, for lack of any other way of communicating the incommunicable; but the secret is first and foremost *plus loin que tous les mots.* Pierre Angélique writes in vain only if the reader does not search for this beyond of language; and this possibility of someone unclothing them is the only justification for there even being 'more words'.

In another instance, in the preface specifically, Bataille writes that 'man is more than a creature limited to its genitals. But they, those inavowable parts of him, teach him his secret'.[312] Man's secret is what Bataille's words and sentences aim to reveal to the reader. Pierre Angélique's words too are clothing that secret, in an attempt to reveal it. What makes Pierre Angélique's words different from the author of the preface is that the former is the one who is actually created in this discursive universe, he lives inside the fictional world into which his experience is incorporated. He is on the threshold of theory and fiction and this makes his position crucial for the novel. 'Pierre Angélique is careful to say so: we know nothing, we are sunk in the depths of ignorance's darkness',[313] Bataille says; and Pierre Angélique's words should not be taken lightly, for only he can say from a position of power what others cannot. His power stems from the fact that he has taken a glimpse at the fundamental truth of eroticism, and therefore, he is presented as the possessor of the secret that he can now communicate to others.

[312] *Ibid*., p. 142
[313] *Ibid.*, p. 139

Words, therefore, is the first place one should look for *Madame Edwarda*'s secret. Its narrative revolves around this *secret* that the book possesses, which the narrator lusts for and which Bataille in the preface informs us of its existence. The notion of secrecy is central in the book, but this raises questions about how this is to be perceived, if it is to be perceived at all: 'Ce livre a son secret, je dois le taire: il est plus loin que tous le mots'.[314] The narrator, who writes these words as he reflects upon this specific task of narrating his experience, informs us that he must 'silence' this secret; it is 'further than any words'. This leads us to assume that if he could put into words what lies at the center of the book, he would. But since it is beyond all words, only silence can express it. Still, the kind of silence that he talks about is not one of concealment, in the sense that there is nothing that can take its place. The silence is there not in order to conceal what must be said, but because there isn't anything that can be said in its place. The lack of meaning is not to be reversed into meaning, but perceived and appreciated as such. Silence, therefore, is active; it exists on its own accord.

The nature of silence and its connection to the secret that the book possesses will be discussed at this point having as a guide the narrative itself. On page 36 of the French text, the narrative is interrupted by nine rows of dots, which occupy two blank pages. This is a visual as well as textual break which, I will argue, illustrates the active silence that lies at the center of *Madame Edwarda.* This break follows the scene where the narrator and Edwarda walk up the stairs to the room full of mirrors where they will make love: 'The room's noisy indifference to her happiness, to the measured gravity of her step, was both a royal consecration and a flowering festival: death itself was present at the feast in the guise of what is called, in the nakedness of the brothel, "the butcher's cut"'.[315] After this sentence, the obtrusive blank pages with the aligned dots constitute

[314] Bataille, *Madame Edwarda*, Pauvert, p. 49

[315] Georges Bataille, *Madame Edwarda,* https://thesorcerersapprenticeonline.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/no-18-madame-edwarda.pdf, p. 11. I

the break, which continues until page 38. Then the narrative is resumed, as a continuation of the break, with the word 'les glaces' in the French text, following three more lines of continuous dots. There is no formal beginning of this next sentence, written as a continuation of the aligned dots ('…....les glaces'), with a lower case 'l', which suggests a sort of uninterrupted flow of what has happened. There is a sharp contrast between the actual abrupt break of the narrative and the hint of continuation that Bataille inserts. The narrative is resumed as if nothing has happened, but the reader of course is aware of what has happened: Edwarda and the narrator just made love in the room of the brothel that is designated for such an act, as is the normal course of events in such a place, the logical outcome of the transaction that took place at the previous scene.

This crucial part of the *récit* although demonstrated in the form of the lack of words, with symbols on empty pages rather than meaningful sentences, is the depiction of something that is beyond words, the secret that cannot be uttered. The scene is followed by the continuation of the narrative with the following sentence: '….. the mirrors that covered the walls of our room from floor to ceiling, and from which the ceiling itself was made, multiplied the image of our animal coupling, and at the slightest movement our pounding hearts were opened to the void into which we disappeared in the infinity of our reflections'.[316] It is interesting that what follows is described in terms of images and reflections: 'image of our animal coupling', 'in the infinity of our reflections'. There are two contrasting notions here, which are connected to each other, or rather flow into one another: the 'animal' coupling flows into the void where their 'open hearts' disappear. One cannot help but make a distinction between what is animal and what is human, separating the act that takes place into two domains: the sexual act

will proceed by using this translation in English, as, at this point, its proximity to the French text is relevant to the argument of this chapter.

[316] *Ibid*., p. 11

belonging to the field of animal sexuality, and the sexual act that is a manifestation and part of eroticism, something that is fundamental in human beings and that defines their very existence. However, the fact that this interconnection is described in terms of images and reflections could be suggesting that the narrative is always a reflection, always an image of something that cannot be narrated. This something is the secret, it is experience and transgression that can only be shared as a secret. Man, in being the animal that loses himself in eroticism, *is* this secret, he is the moment of transition, of transgression, or the limit that designates the passage from animal to man. He is, in a sense, the dots that do not conceal something nor do they represent in their implied silence what should have been said, but make manifest the positive, creative nature of experience as that which no words can contain.

The contrasting notions that inform the flow of the narrative before and after the break which is also in itself caught up in the tension between writing and non-writing, is reinforced by another kind of contradiction. Apart from the man/animal division and the writing style, or more accurately the lack of writing style that the author chooses to employ in place of a description (it is a whole scene that is depicted in these two blank pages filled with dotted lines) it is also the staging of the events that are taking place which offers insight into the narrator's divided state: the light and noise of the brothel is in sharp contrast with the religious, sacred character of the narrator's experience as he walks up the stairs. He is fully conscious of both his shame at his being looked at and even mocked by the crowd in the brothel, as well as of the gravity of the situation: 'Yet this simple passage between densely packed tables of girls and clients, this vulgar rite of 'The Lady Ascending' followed by the man who will make love to her, took on for me, at that moment, nothing less than a hallucinatory solemnity'.[317] *Light* is associated throughout the narrative with confusion, noise, and the absurdity of the world full of

[317] *Ibid.*

objects that come in the way of the darkness of the *night*. Night and silence are qualities that Madame Edwarda possesses, and she is God. The sacred and the profane are in direct contrast throughout the narrative, and the narrator is also in a constant struggle to balance the two, to escape from the light into the night of God:

> I could say nothing about the state I was in, only that in the midst of that tumult of lights, the night descended upon me! I wanted to turn the table over, smash everything – but it was fixed to the floor and wouldn't budge. Has any man faced a more farcical situation? Then everything began to dissolve, the room and Madame Edwarda. Only the night remained . . . [318]

In this extract, the contrast between the noisy tumult of lights and the calm, nude darkness of the night is clearly manifested. Light and darkness are at play from the very beginning and thus set up the two contradicting notions that become the space where the narrative is unraveled. From the very beginning, the protagonist finds himself in the streets of Paris in his anguished state, with an overwhelming urge to strip himself naked. It seems that the narrative is born together with the narrator's descent into the nudity of the night: 'the night itself was laid bare in those deserted streets, and I wanted to be just as naked'.[319] It is only after 'the night finished falling', in the darkness and its nudity, that the *récit* can be unfolded. It is also at this point that the first bracketed paragraph that constitutes the parallel level of *Madame Edwarda'*s meta-narrative, makes its appearance. As the protagonist immerses himself into the night, his need to narrate his experience begins: '(my entry into the matter is hard. I could have avoided all this and still made my tale sound 'plausible'. It would have been in my interest to take detours. But this is how it has to be – a beginning without diversions. I continue...

[318] *Ibid.*, p. 10
[319] *Ibid.,* p. 9

and it gets harder…)'.[320] *Madame Edwarda* in this sense has two beginnings: the beginning of the tale, with the protagonist stripping himself naked as the night in the dark narrow streets of Paris, and the beginning of the meta-narrative, with the narrator turning his experience into words. Both these levels seem to be triggered by darkness, or nakedness, which becomes the space where experience is played out.

Contrary to this 'creative' darkness of the night, the brightness of light and its association with objects is always presented as an intrusion to this realm of the sacred where Madame Edwarda belongs. Throughout the *récit* the use of objects is quite sparse, and when it does take place, like in the scene at the brothel quoted earlier, it underlines their position as obstacles whose function is to obscure rather than illuminate. This is the paradox that informs the text and guides the tale: light obscures while darkness illuminates. This reversal is important as it echoes a theme that is central in Bataille's theory, and is also manifested in his fiction, where objects necessarily stage both the narrative and the theoretical ideas that underline it. In this instant, the bright and noisy atmosphere of the brothel is presented as something that needs to be overcome, turned over, like the table - if it wasn't fixed to the floor. Everyday objects are a source of frustration, as they stand in the way of experience. The narrator is in the presence of God, but God, as Bataille informs us in the preface 'is nothing if he is not, in every sense of the word, the surpassing of God – in the sense of vulgar being, in the sense of horror and impurity, in the sense, finally, of *nothing* . . .'.[321] To reach a state of non-knowledge is what is demanded by the narrator if he is to discover 'the secret' that he will later communicate to others.

The narrative is a journey from sense to non-sense, and the most straightforward way to communicate this is by addressing the problem of our relationship to the world

[320] *Ibid.*
[321] *Ibid.*, p. 6

as we know it, to objects, to things. What offers a sense of meaning to our being is the way we relate to the universe, to everything that surrounds us, and this is in a more narrow sense the way we deal with objects. This interaction is always mediated by the usefulness and functionality of everything that we encounter. The chain of usefulness into which being is intrinsically absorbed, which offers meaning as it lights up and illuminates the world around us, is precisely what obscures life at the fundamental level of inner experience. The repeated theme of the nudity of the night is in accordance with the lack of usefulness, which reveals the world stripped of utility-based meaning. In *Madame Edwarda* objects are treated directly as barriers that must be overcome. They are pushed towards their necessary annihilation by the narrative itself: 'then everything begun to dissolve, the room and Madame Edwarda. Only the night remained'.[322] It is after this disappearance of objective reality that the narrator is faced with Edwarda's divinity and he accepts it as such. He sees her as absent herself, 'completely and utterly black', with 'the unintelligible simplicity of a stone', 'an empty silence', and the immediate effect that her transposition from the realm of usefulness to that of meaninglessness has on the narrator is this: 'in the middle of that city, I had the feeling of being in the mountains at night, lost in the midst of a lifeless solitude'.[323]

Between these two notions of darkness and light, the sacred and the profane, there exists the place of the book's secret. That the secret is beyond words is something that the narrator makes clear in the course of the narrative, and Bataille mentions in the preface. The blank pages that take the place of a description of the protagonists' love making, are there not because of some literary trick, not to trigger the reader's imagination or to suggest that what has happened belongs to the realm of silence. Silence is there but it is the kind of silence that is louder than words: it is the lack of

[322] *Ibid*., p. 10
[323] *Ibid*.

meaning, the lack of words in its positive sense. In other words, if the narrator could communicate what had occurred in these two pages, he would. But if this consists of the book's secret, that can only be shared *as a secret.* It is not there to be deciphered, to be decoded into discourse, but to be shared in its quality as secret.

For Pierre Angélique, the solution to this apparent impasse is to accept Madame Edwarda's impossibility, by depriving himself of his authority over her, which arises from his position as observer, as an outsider that is able to narrate and to place the events of that night into a certain timeframe. Confronting the divine he realises that if he is to 'make sense' of his experience, he has to let go of that sense and fall into the void that is opened up with no hope of return. This is the point where narration becomes not only a challenge but a deadlock, for the problem of communicating his experience, which was set from the very beginning as the aim of this book, is facing its logical outcome: plunging into the void necessarily results in giving up on discourse, on narrative. However, the fact that the book consists of another level, that of the meta-narrative, functions so as to place the reader into the narrative itself, at once implicating her and deeming her responsible for her act, the specific act of reading.

Madame Edwarda is not only the story of a secret that the narrator lusts for, but also, with the same degree of importance, the story of the narrator's attempt to write about it. These two levels are interconnected to the point where one completes the other. The preface by Georges Bataille is followed by a kind of foreword, a short paragraph placed before the beginning of the narrative, which reads as a warning and invitation:

> *If you are afraid of everything, read this book – but listen to me first: if you laugh, it's because you are afraid. A book, you think, is something inert. That's possible. And yet what if, as is the case, you do not know how to read? Would you begin to doubt . . . ? Are you alone? Do you shake with the cold? Do you know to what*

point man is 'yourself'? A fool – and naked? [324]

The preface, which can be said to be a theoretical account of the author, is followed by this direct appeal to the reader as a sort of 'reading manual', somewhere between fiction and non-fiction, after which the actual narrative unfolds, itself interrupted by the level of the meta-narrative, with the narrator now placing his own experience of writing as a theme parallel to the tale that is unfolded in the main body of the *récit*. The structure of the book is informed by this interchange between what is happening in the tale and what is happening as the tale is being told, and this is indicative of the significance of the reader's role and the effect that her reading – if she knows how to read – has on the book itself. The narrative ends abruptly, with Pierre Angélique reflecting one final time on his struggle to write, in the bracketed section which ends with this sentence: 'The narrative, should I continue with it?' to which as an immediate response, unbracketed, comes the reply: 'I've finished. From the slumber which, for a short time, left us asleep in the back of the taxi, I was the first to awaken, sick... The rest is irony, the long wait for death…'.[325] Until the final sentences, the book is a continuous back and forth from the narrative to the meta-narrative, with its ending consisting not so much of a closure, but rather a return to the beginning, to the invitation extended towards the reader who is now 'responsible' through her own reading. Not knowing how to read is the key to leaving the *récit* infinitely open, and it is offered as the only possible way of facing a secret that is beyond all words; that is by sharing it, passing it on as a secret, never decoding it into something that can be placed into discourse. The impasse that the narrator reaches at the end of knowledge as he falls into the void that Madame Edwarda's secret opens up, which in a way forces him to end the narrative, not because it is complete but simply because 'the rest is irony, the long wait for death', is resolved

[324] *Ibid*., p. 2. Italics in the original
[325] *Ibid*., p. 17

by the reader, if she in her turn denies it a conclusion. As Denis Hollier notes in *Against Architecture*:

> Reading confirms a form by covering it with a mathematical cloak. But the mathematical garment, while providing form, covers up nudity. To read *Madame Edwarda* (to read Bataille, to read – if we knew how to read) would be to undo the book, to bare the absence of a ground, the absence of anything beneath things. To bare the formless nakedness of a slit.[326]

This is the narrator's appeal to the reader: to resist a conclusion, a mathematical interpretation, and therefore maintain the book's nudity, its closeness to the night of its protagonist. Reading *Madame Edwarda* without holding onto the ground of knowledge is to preserve the narrative, to maintain its force as a secret that is shared, and in this way, fulfil the paradoxical destiny of Bataille's fiction, which is to remain incomplete, resisting definitive interpretation and conclusion.

Bataille's fiction is in the above paradoxical statement complete only its incompletion, and this is rooted in the fact that the narrative is a way to convey what is incommunicable, what goes beyond the human world of discourse and understanding. To strip the text bare is to deprive it of its usefulness, and the annihilation of utility through the narrative is a way of reaching this objective. The narrative is always a story that is being told, but in which everything disappears as into a black hole. Language is there to describe and create images of the words that are being used, but at the same time it opens up the space where these images and words are pushed towards their own self destruction. It is clear that the narrative has a purpose and that the author is at pains to 'lead' the reader towards something that is not easily detected, but that requires the

[326] Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 158

greatest surrender from her part. The journey that the narrator goes through in his own experience with Madame Edwarda is one where he gradually surrenders to the lack of meaning that experience demands of him.

This, however, is being accomplished via the narrative, and it is within its own words that non-meaning is to be found. I will suggest that the answer of how it is possible to write that which is beyond language should be looked for in the place where it is, despite all odds, written; and that is the narrative itself. In *Madame Edwarda*'s succession of images and events, excess is being written and therefore, it is there that an attempt to identify it must begin. Allan Stoekl in his essay 'Recognition in *Madame Edwarda*', follows the stages of the narrative, and his analysis is helpful for illuminating the journey that the protagonists - and, I will argue, the reader - takes towards non-knowledge. Stoekl argues that the ritual substitution that occurs in the novel is inseparable from recognition, not in the Hegelian/Kojevian sense of autonomous validation, but recognition that is ceremonial rather than existential: '[…] recognition here appears in the form of exchange between unstable terms – between divinity and animality, activity and passivity, the female and the male […]. My being, such as it is, is constructed and dismantled through its ritual substitutability with the other'.[327] Madame Edwarda and the narrator recognise each other in a sphere that is precisely beyond recognition. It is at the realm of the impossible that there is communication, outside the norms of human activity. Stoekl notes that the final ceremony that occurs inside the taxi is crucial because of the fact that the narrator finally offers himself stripped of his power of narration: he no longer tries to attach sense and meaning to something that is beyond meaning, echoing therefore Bataille's warning in the preface: 'we cannot with impunity incorporate the very word into our speech which surpasses words, the word *God*; directly we do so, this word, surpassing itself, explodes past its defining, restrictive

[327]Allan Stoekl, 'Recognition in *Madame Edwarda*', in *Bataille, Writing the Sacred,* ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill, Routledge, 1995, p. 88

limits'.[328] Pierre Angélique is laid bare in the final scene, in the presence of God, and this experience is *experience* only if discursive means are forgotten. The *récit* is brought abruptly to an end, 'the rest is irony, long, weary waiting for death'.[329]

Madame Edwarda ends with another long passage in brackets, where Pierre Angélique, back in his comfortable temporal and spatial human world, gives the only acceptable conclusion of the tale of his experience: that there will be no more words:

> No, I can't conceive of any 'meaning' other than 'my' anguish, and as for that, I know all about it. And for the time being: nonsense. Monsieur Nonsense is writing and understands that he is mad. It's atrocious. But his madness, this meaninglessness – how 'serious' it has become all of a sudden! - might that indeed be 'meaningful'? [No, Hegel has nothing to do with a maniac girl's 'apotheosis'] My life only has a meaning insofar as I lack one: oh, but let me mad! Make something of all this he who is able to, understand it he who is dying […]'[330]

As the story reaches its culminating moment in the narrator's experience, Pierre Angélique's attempt to narrate it also reaches an end. Both stop at the limit of meaning, revealing that non-sense is what lies at the center of *Madame Edwarda.* This is a novel about Her, the title tells us, and she is God; but more precisely, it is the story of the narrator's encounter with God, and his attempt to narrate it. These two axes that run parallel to each other are shaped by different relationships, the first one informed by the content, by the 'events' that occurred one night in the streets of Paris, and the second by the very fact of those events being narrated with the intention of being read and understood by the reader, or by 'he who is dying'. While the first relationship is more easily detected and perceived in its triangular form (Madame Edwarda - Pierre

[328] Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man,* p. 142
[329] *Ibid*., p. 159
[330] *Ibid*.

Angélique/Narrator – Driver),[331] the second one is not as straightforward. I will argue, however, that it is also shaped in a triangular form, with the interaction of Bataille/Author – Pierre Angélique/Narrator – Reader, forming a similar relationship.

In the first schema, the three characters are engaged in a semi reciprocal relationship, with Madame Edwarda and the narrator sharing the same ecstasy, both losing themselves while the driver is described as merely a vehicle: Madame Edwarda 'mounts' him, and slips him inside her ('elle monta sur lui, voluptueuse, elle glissa de sa main le chauffeur en elle')[332], but he remains detached. As Stoekl notes: 'neither Edwarda nor the narrator 'leads' or 'drives'; that is the function of the human, the *chauffeur*, the worker. But he is absent, a mere body to be mounted like a horse'.[333] Of the three characters, only two communicate, and they manage to do so because of their lack of (meaningful) communication. As the narrator says, Madame Edwarda, at her climax, is situated at the realm of the impossible, and there is where they both find themselves; by losing themselves. At this instant there is no temporality and no attachment to the world that demands the slightest concern with everyday life. Work has no place in this experience, and subsequently the driver/worker's presence is equivalent to the presence of any other object attached to the usefulness of the 'real' world. Non-sense is total at this moment, for those who are able to lose themselves in it. The rules of the useful, ordinary world, along with the meaning attached to them are there in order to be transgressed in the final annihilation of all sense.

In the second schema, the triangular relationship is being formed 'after the event', after the experience has already taken place, at the level of its transformation into words. Georges Bataille, the author of the preface, informing the 'theoretical'

[331] This relationship is also mentioned twice in the text, highlighting the connection that exists between the three characters, in the phrase 'Madame Edwarda, the driver and I' (pp. 156 and 158 in the Austryn Wainhouse translation).
[332] Bataille, *Madame Edwarda,* Pauvert, p. 50
[333] Stoekl, 'Recognition in *Madame Edwarda'*, p. 88

background of *Madame Edwarda* is present in the novel together with Pierre Angélique, whose function in this schema is not confined to him being merely a character, but also the author of the *récit.* The third part, the reader, also plays a major role in the story as she is specifically implored, both by Bataille in the preface, and by Pierre Angélique in the course of the tale – the tale of his attempt to write his experience. The reader is advised by Bataille not to take the reading of this book lightly, and she is urged by the anguished narrator to unclothe his words, to find the meaning of this tale in its non-meaning. As is the case with the first schema, the second has a culminating point as well, which appears at the moment when the story is broken. Words gain their meaning when they are no longer necessary, at the point where the form, the body of the book is reduced to merely a vehicle. The book's secret is unveiled to the one who is able to destroy the words one reads and who, 'entering into this book, would fall as into a hole'[334] as Bataille writes in *Inner Experience.* The reader experiences transgression as she strips the words from their meaning, therefore becoming an intrinsic part of the text itself. While the characters transgress their own limits, the reader transgresses the limits of language, for the latter is there in order to be destroyed, to be stripped of what provides it with its very existence; in other words, meaning is there in order to become non-meaning.

In order to pursue the reader's involvement with the text and how this involvement in the final stage is equivalent to the narrator's experience, I will once again refer to Allan Stoekl's essay 'Recognition in *Madame Edwarda*'. Stoekl identifies three sections in the narrative which, through a series of substitutions and reversals, illuminate the fact that recognition in this novel is inseparable from ritual substitution. His account is enlightening with regard to the importance of narration and the way in which this issue is reflected not only at the actual content of the tale but also, I will

[334] Bataille, *Inner Experience,* p. 222

argue, at the level of the meta-narrative, in which the reader is invited to let herself be led by the narrator. According to Stoekl, in the first section, the Catholic ritual of the Mass of the Catechumens, a Synaxis, or gathering is at play, with the narrator walking into the brothel and choosing God, in the midst of a mocking crowd. Madame Edwarda's - absurd at this point - demand that the narrator must kiss her 'rags' corresponds to a Communion, in which however, the narrator is still an unbeliever, he has not taken part in any sacrificial act that would truly engage him in an exchange with the divine: 'no exchange has taken place. Nor has his position in narration, in presentation and observation, been challenged. Like the room itself, and the bordello ('Mirrors'), he merely reflects'.[335] The second section corresponds to the Offertory in which the offering of gifts is played out, and which is most important for our account at this point. What the narrator offers is his own surrender, and his gift is that of letting go of his sense of meaning: 'by the end of this section, he is no longer the stable, human (and male), principle that would make sense of Edwarda's madness, reflect on it, write a coherent story about it, etc.'.[336] After his attempt to situate topographically Edwarda and himself by pointing to the direction of the sky above them, followed by her violent explosion in which she calls him a 'fake priest', the narrator finally surrenders to what is divine about Madame Edwarda: her absence, silence, lack of meaning, which, as Stoekl points out is 'simply one that is not human, that is not a function of interiority or knowledge. It is instead both beyond and beneath any possible understanding'.[337] In the third and final section, the substitution of ritual roles that takes place results in a fusion that annihilates the difference between pairs such as animal and divine, active and passive, male and female. At the end of this section, narration has finally let go of its authoritarian stand over what is happening, and it becomes a Communion that returns

[335] Stoekl, 'Recognition in *Madame Edwarda'*, p. 83
[336] *Ibid*.
[337] *Ibid*., p. 84

the divinity to animality through this substitution. The scene where Madame Edwarda 'mounts' the driver while the narrator supports her head is the final ceremony that allows recognition to take place, and where communication is established 'across the gap of the human, the space of its impossibility'.[338]

The narrator goes through his own metamorphosis somewhere around the middle of the narrative, at the end of the second section in Stoekl's schema, when he renounces his own authority of narration. By giving up on his attempt to understand and subsequently, to record or decode what is happening, he finally reaches the point of communication with Madame Edwarda, in other words, he succeeds in getting what he desires: *to know.* 'Within Madame Edwarda, grief – a grief without suffering or tears – had turned into an empty silence. And yet, I still wanted to know';[339] and further down:

> A deathly darkness descended from the vault. Without giving it a moment's thought, I 'knew' that a season of agony had begun for me. I accepted it, I wanted to suffer – to go further, to go, even though I should be struck down, to the 'void' itself. I knew, I wanted to know, lusting for her secret, without doubting for an instant that it was death's kingdom.[340]

The narrator wants to know, but what this knowledge consists of is exactly the opposite of knowing. It is non-knowledge that lies behind the secret he lusts for, and for that he must plunge further into the 'void'. Madame Edwarda at this point is described as a black rock ('cette pierre noire'), which finally makes the narrator's name worthy of its resemblance to her divine character: Pierre Angélique is now not just the narrator but the being who is willing to fall into the darkness of the void, and for whom knowing has

[338] *Ibid*., p. 88
[339] Georges Bataille, *Madame Edwarda,* https://thesorcerersapprenticeonline.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/no-18-madame-edwarda.pdf, p. 12
[340] *Ibid*., p. 13

become its opposite: the lack of meaning which is not human and which is beyond any attempt for narration in the sense of documentation, of exercising any kind of authority on the events that take place. In order for there to be communication Pierre must let go of reflection, leave the space of the 'Mirrors' where he is merely a client and surrender to the darkness of the night, the meaninglessness of experience; he must become, faithful to his own name, the 'angelic stone'.

In order to explore in more depth the issue of knowledge and its role in the narrative as well in the reader's involvement in it, I will proceed to a reading of Marguerite Duras' *The Malady of Death.* This work of fiction can offer precious insight both on the level of the narrative itself and on the relationship that is developed between the author and the reader. Its opening sentence almost seems like a response to the narrative of *Madame Edwarda*, or to its narrator in particular:

> You wouldn't have known her, you'd have seen her everywhere at once, in a hotel, in a street, in a train, in a bar, in a book, in a film, in yourself, your inmost self, when your sex grew erect in the night, seeking somewhere to put itself, somewhere to shed its load of tears.[341]

The author addresses the unnamed protagonist of this novel whose presence is made manifest only because of this 'you'. From the very beginning Duras tells him that he would have seen her everywhere, in his dreams, in waking life, in his fantasies, in his own self, but he wouldn't have *known* her. His fate is predetermined, his desire to know, to possess her intellectually, will never be satisfied. Although this is a clear affirmation of the impossibility of knowledge, and therefore the affirmation of a failure on his part to get what he desires, this failure constitutes what is essential in the relationship that is

[341] Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death,* Grove Press New York, 1986, p. 1

formed in the novel, that is communication, the appearance of the Community of Lovers, as Blanchot argues in the last part of *The Unavowable Community.* He writes:

> Here is the room, the closed space open to nature and closed to other humans where, during an indefinite time reckoned in nights – though no night may come to an end – two beings try to unite only to live (and in a certain way to celebrate) the failure that constitutes the truth of what would be their perfect union, the *lie* of that union which always takes place by not taking place. Do they in spite of all that form some kind of c*ommunity*? It is rather *because* of that that they form a community.[342]

That their union is inconceivable is not a restraint but a requirement for communication, in the sense of sharing the impossible, in a similar way that Madame Edwarda and the narrator communicate at the back of the taxi through the vertiginous fixed point which offers no sense of meaning, just a 'blind slipping into death'.[343] In *The Malady of Death* meaning is denied from the beginning, every effort is in vain. He is the one who would like to try, while she is aware of this failure, her state being that of constant fatigue, always sleeping, absent but also eternally present. Her presence and reality stem from her knowledge, which is again, similarly to Madame Edwarda, not equal to meaning, but to the possession of a secret. In her presence/absence she is the embodiment of impossibility and failure, but one that is necessary, or inescapable. The only possible possession is not intellectual, not physical, but rather a realisation of its very impossibility. The 'you' in *The Malady of Death,* this figure of the unnamed man, although born out of this failure, is never completely immersed in it, for his active state, his always trying, asking, justifying, is never attuned to the passivity, or the night of his

[342] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community,* Station Hill Press, 1988, p. 49
[343] Georges Bataille, *Madame Edwarda,* https://thesorcerersapprenticeonline.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/no-18-madame-edwarda.pdf, p. 16

female counterpart. He is in this sense similar to *Madame Edwarda'*s narrator, whose failure to give himself wholly to non-sense results in his feeble attempt to make sense of the divine, something that by its very nature cannot be conceptualised.

At the end of the tale, she is gone, her absence takes on the literal form of her not being physically there, in the room, and he tells the story of their affair in a bar. He affirms in this pointless narration that his failure was never complete but always restrained by his effort to know. 'All you remember of the whole affair are certain words she said in her sleep, the ones that tell you what's wrong with you: the malady of death'. [344] Her words disclose his disease but he is unable to incorporate them. Understanding what his disease is would mean surrendering to the malady of death, to the impossibility that opened up between them, in other words, going 'beyond all words'. However, his failure to surrender to the void that lies beyond words is also a sort of opening towards a different kind of community, the one that is once again formed in absence, the community of readers of *The Malady of Death.*

To return to the opening sentence of the novel, 'you wouldn't have known her' is striking in its direct, authoritarian address to this still unidentified 'you'. The structure of the book is such that its large printing only fits a paragraph or two in each page, and therefore, this first sentence also consists of the first page of the novel and the first paragraph that the reader encounters, in all its direct and aggressive power. This 'you' is not yet identified as the unnamed protagonist of the *récit*, and in its immediacy, it has the ability to implicate the reader into the *récit* from the very beginning, in a bizarre accusation coming from the supreme authority of the book: the author herself. The commanding *you* in this opening sentence is momentarily, the reader of the actual book, whose words she is in the final stage destined to receive. This implication is dissipated in the following page where it is clear that this 'you' is not the reader, it is the

[344] Duras, *The Malady of Death,* p. 55

protagonist who ‘wouldn’t have known her’, but, the inability for intellectual possession is already established as the reader’s impotence as well. This continuous address opens up an ambiguity that does not spare the reader, who, involved in the *récit* from the very beginning - indirectly, by her mere opening and reading the book, but also directly by her momentary misunderstanding of a direct accusation – is now faced with the task of completing the failure which the protagonist has initiated. Although he has, in his constant effort to know, been unable to lose himself in the enlightening darkness of non-knowledge, the reader is given the opportunity to keep the *récit* open, to participate in its sharing as in the sharing of a secret. The secret that *she* holds, and that that *he* wants to unveil, is that of the impossibility of communication, so long as communication is the transgression of every human discourse. His not knowing her is a condition for there being a community of lovers, but in order for it to be sustained, the reader must keep it open, herself not succumbing to the seduction of words, but rather to that which they conceal.

Blanchot in the last lines of *The Unavowable Community,* commenting on Wittgenstein’s precept “Whereof one cannot speak there one must be silent”, states that this ‘indicates that in the final analysis one has to talk in order to remain silent. But with what kinds of words? That is one of the questions this little book entrusts to others, not that they may answer it, rather that they may choose to carry it with them, and perhaps, extend it’.[345] To carry it with them, and perhaps extend it, is what the readers of *The Malady of Death* as well as *Madame Edwarda* are asked to do, directly and indirectly. This is accomplished by not giving in to the temptation of closing the *récit* but rather by remaining faithful to the appeal towards non-knowledge, the sharing of the secret *as secret* and not as a truth to be discovered, known, possessed.

Blanchot in the same essay, quoting Bataille’s words ‘to sacrifice-is not to kill,

[345] Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community,* p. 56

but to abandon and to give', notes that community is shaped by its absence, by the gift of abandonment: 'an absence which, in a limited way, applies to the community whose only clearly ungraspable secret it would be. The absence of community is not the failure of community: absence belongs to community as its extreme moment […]'.[346] In *Madame Edwarda*, the relationship that is established with the sharing of the secret is that between the author and his readers. The secret is ungraspable but it is the shared experience of what cannot be grasped that reveals it as such. The two blank pages that break the narrative in their deafening silence are not there to represent the secret, in the sense that there is nothing that could serve as a signified to them. On the contrary, they present the secret, as it is, ungraspable but shared in its absence by a community that is formed precisely on and because of this absence.

Madame Edwarda is a book that opens up, through its contradictory themes of darkness and light, continuity and break, noise and silence, a space where difference is annihilated. This is accomplished on all its levels with the overcoming of what is human, that is the mathematical view that dresses things up instead of stripping them bare. As a final account of the levels of *Madame Edwarda*, I will suggest that what is also disclosed in reading this work, keeping in mind that theory, narrative and meta-narrative overlap and complete each other, is the fusion of the personal and the communal. This is expressed in the narrator's words when, addressing the reader he says: 'but Madame Edwarda is not the phantom of a dream, her sweat has soaked my handkerchief: to the point that, led by her, I get there too, I want to lead (you)'; in the French: 'cependant Madame Edwarda n'est pas le fantôme d'un rêve, ses sueurs ont trempé mon mouchoir: à ce point où, conduit par elle, je parvins, à mon tour, je voudrais conduire'.[347] This is an attempt to reconcile at once the real, lived experience

[346] *Ibid*., p. 15
[347] Bataille, *Madame Edwarda,* Pauvert, pp. 48, 49

of the narrator with his own memory of it while he is in the process of writing about it, as well as with the reader's part and implication in this experience. There exists a movement from Madame Edwarda to the narrator and finally towards the final recipient, the reader. What links these three entities which at this instance all form part of the narrative, is the transmission of the initial experience. The narrator's real (personal) experience led by Madame Edwarda is redirected now towards the community of readers. The reality of what has happened is emphasised as the trigger of this chain of reactions. She is real, so real that she leads him to do the driving himself, as an attempt to transfer this reality to others, to whoever is willing to read it. He was led towards the secret, and now in his turn he is leading the reader, through the narrative, via words, which must be stripped to their nudity. The goal, in other words, is to transfer the personal lived experience to a wider level, that of community, where it is to be lived by others who have not participated in it. In this case, it is to transfer something that cannot be put into words, whose nature is that of a secret, by remaining faithful to this nature and therefore by sharing this secret. Both at the level of the personal and at that of the communal, it is this impossibility of knowing that sustains communication and that is preserved in order to be transferred from one to the other. As a final consideration of this significance of meaning and knowledge in the context of the fictional narrative, I will engage in the next and final chapter with a reading of *My Mother*, in which the narrative, because of its incestuous theme is, in a way, 'the mother' of all narratives.

Chapter Seven: *My Mother*

My Mother is one of the novels that was written with the prospect of forming the larger work *Divinus Deus* together with *Madame Edwarda,* and its manuscript was found unfinished at Bataille's death, and therefore published posthumously in 1966. Anyone familiar with Bataille's fiction and theory will not be the least surprised to find that its title corresponds to the reader's suspicion that this is a work that deals with the subject of motherhood in the most transgressive and provocative way: it is a tale of incest, of one of the most widely discussed and acknowledged taboos in the history of civilised societies. It is a story about the narrator's mother, but it is this *my* of *My Mother* that is most crucial: in accordance with the Oedipal connotations that unavoidably appear in its reading, this is the story of the son, 'the child of lust' as she calls him, an Oedipus who does not blind himself but chooses to be exposed to the divine consequences of his actions. An Oedipus who continues to see, however, who refuses to pluck his eyes out, is one that does not suffer the only punishment that is fit for his actions - but which also offers the necessary and redeeming closure - but rather suffers from a different kind of torture initiated by this lack of ending. The seeing Oedipus is in a constant state of anguish caused by this very lack of closure; he is, as Bataille would have it, choosing to live while dying, becoming the embodiment of the ultimate transgression rather than conforming to the 'easy way out' of putting an end to his torture, as the cathartic blinding of Oedipus would do. The Oedipal myth is a crime and punishment narrative to which, moreover, the punishment is absolutely essential. The myth is justified by the self-inflicted blinding in such a way that without it there would be no myth. If then we consider the narrator as the Oedipus who does not blind himself, could he still be named Oedipus? Or would he rather become an Oedipus who is de-sublimated, exposing in his

truth the very thing he is supposed to be concealing in his mythic narrative?

This is an important question as it brings out a problematic that is not limited to the psychoanalytic interpretation and discussion of the incestuous theme that lies at the center of the novel, but it also opens up, in its content, the broader issue of sexuality, as well as that of narration, and of the function of fiction as a means for communication. Its being unfinished also serves as a point of departure towards the discussion of these issues that can be either obscured or illuminated by this apparent state of incompletion.

In order to approach these questions I would like to begin with a consideration of *Eroticism,* which can offer a theoretical background that contextualises Bataille's own view on the theme of incest. In *Eroticism,* Bataille deals with the problem of incest as a specific aspect of the more general problem of sexuality:

> I am astonished to be the first person to state this so unequivocally. It is ridiculous to isolate a specific 'taboo' such as the one on incest, just one aspect of the general taboo, and look for its explanation outside its universal basis, namely the amorphous and universal prohibition bearing on sexuality.[348]

Bataille identifies the problem as being the general attitude of science towards 'matters that are vague, difficult to grasp and variable'.[349] The problem of incest is given as a 'puzzle' to be solved, the kind that scientists like, as he notes, for it evades the whole picture, focusing on something that is more specific and more likely to be solved. In the context of a book on eroticism, incest is studied as part of the general problem, with its author struggling to maintain the balance between the general and the specific, that is, taking into account both the 'external' point of view (studies by Levi-Strauss and Kinsey) as well as an 'internal' account of sexuality.

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[348] Bataille, *Eroticism,* pp. 50, 51
[349] *Ibid*., pp. 51, 52

In the second part of *Eroticism,* Bataille devotes a whole chapter to the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, titled 'The Enigma of Incest'. Its position in this second part of the book is important for its structure for the latter, as we have seen in chapter three of this thesis, is itself revealing of the different takes and positions that exist on the theme of eroticism. Bataille is reconciling the two viewpoints, the external and the internal, in order to present a complete account of sexuality, or at least as complete as it can be in the context of a theoretical work like *Eroticism.* This chapter therefore, is placed among the works that offer a crucial though limited perspective, in the sense that while contributing to the study of sexuality, they are not inserted into the general sphere of eroticism which in Bataille's view has to be considered in its wholeness. He articulates the problem as such: 'when Levi-Strauss talks about nature and culture he is setting one abstraction beside another; while the transition from animal to man implies not only those states as such but also their movement into opposite camps'.[350] If the key for the passage from nature to culture is the taboo on incest, this is for Bataille only one aspect of the fundamental transition that occurred in man not as an abstraction but as an entity that is inseparable from the totality of being. While Levi-Strauss' structuralism reduces man to 'an abstract bridge between the natural and the cultural',[351] as Paul Smith suggests in his essay 'Bataille's Erotic Writings and the Return of the Subject', Bataille brings man to the center of existence, with erotic, transgressive experience repositioning the subject. To the structuralist abstract idea of man between nature and culture, Bataille opposes the specific, individualised – and eroticised – man. Smith emphasises the role of the erotic in Bataille's work as 'the point of tension between the animal body and the civilized body',[352] existing therefore outside of the rules that govern the human society, in the realm of transgression. The erotic, therefore, disrupts the abstract wholeness of

[350] *Ibid*., p. 214
[351] Paul Smith, 'Bataille's Erotic Writings and the Return of the Subject', in *On Bataille, Critical Essays,* ed. Leslie Anne Bolt-Irons, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 234
[352] *Ibid*., p. 233

the subject whose 'truth' is found in an area that is not fixed, not systematised and not rationalised. For Smith, Bataille's fiction illuminates the destructive function of the erotic as a force that empties the body of its wholeness, but it also serves as a metaphor for his relation towards structuralism, through the destruction of the notion of an abstract or legalistic wholeness of the subject. This view is helpful as it focuses on the fact that Bataille's fiction has an effect on the subject, it brings subjectivity to the fore, through the erotic. Smith's essay is titled 'Bataille's Erotic Writings and the Return of the Subject', and it is this return that the erotic allows for. The fact that abstraction is reinstated through eroticism might seem peculiar, as for Bataille, it is something that exists outside the realm of law and rationality that founds human nature. Therefore, the subject returns with the aid of something that opposes the calculated entity that humanity has strived to maintain. Bataille's subject is complete only at the limit, at a point where calculation and rationality fail, in other words, at the point where everything that marks the passage to civilisation is transgressed in a movement that both annihilates and illuminates the limit. This movement is transgression, and its nature as internal, or 'subjective', in the sense that it brings the subject back to the fore of existence, signifies the importance of shifting focus to forces that demand a different kind of study, and a discourse that allows for a lack of rationality or a lack of knowledge: a non-knowledge.

I would like to turn now to the narrative itself, where, I will argue, incest emerges in a way that corresponds to Bataille's claim that the crucial issue is not this specific aspect of sexuality, but sexuality in general. In *My Mother* Bataille deals with incest in the most direct way: by narrating it 'as it happens'. The tale progresses as its writing style changes as well. The gentleness of the first part corresponds to the still naïve Pierre who has not yet realised that his mother is nothing less than God and that her corruption is what provides her with her very divinity. He worships her from the

very beginning, but in a way that is not worthy of her. He thinks that she is the victim of a horrible man, his father, who is to blame for her vices. Only after his death she forces him to see, and worship her in the way that corresponds to her being:

> 'What I want', were the words she left me with, administering a poison, 'is that you love me even unto death. For my part, it is in death I love you this very instant. But I don't want your love unless you know I am repulsive, and love me even as you know it'.[353]

These words come from Pierre's mother at the time of his father's funeral. It is only after his death that the truth finds the opportunity to manifest itself. We could see this as part of the Oedipal structure, in the sense that the death of the father as the son's rival 'clears the way' for the mother to be established as his own possession, without any restrictions stemming from the father's ultimate authority. However, the mother is not in any sense freed from the father's authority in order to move to that of the son's. *She* is the ultimate authority, one that is not subject to anyone or anything, she is in fact indifferent to any kind of subordination, as she is beyond any subordinative discourse. What has changed with the father's death is the son's position and not that of his mother's. The son is now freed, but, instead of entering into the sphere of language and discourse, the symbolic universe in Lacanian terms, he is invited on the contrary to a sphere beyond language.

His entering into the realm where his mother reigns begins with her own initiative, as she proposes that he cleans up his father's study, where she knows that he will stumble upon the photographs that will change him forever.

> Interwoven joy and terror strangled me within. I strangled and I gasped from

[353] Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man,* p. 33

> pleasure. The more those pictures terrified me, the more intense was my excitement at the sight of them. After days of accumulating alarms, tensions, suffocations, I was beyond withstanding my own ignominy. I invoked it and I blessed it. It was my inevitable fate[.] [354]

It is through the visual that the narrator enters what he calls 'his inevitable fate'. He experiences a visual shock, one that fills him with terror mingled with pleasure. The scene that describes his discovery and reaction is worth quoting at length as it is indicative of the nature of shock, or *cut* that this revelatory moment has:

> I reddened, I clenched my teeth and I was obliged to sit down, but I still had a sheaf of those repulsive photos in my hand. My impulse was to rush out of there, but I had to do something with them, to get rid of them before my mother's return. Feverishly, I stacked them, made them into piles. Upon the tables where I put them I piled them too high, they fell, I surveyed the disaster: scattered by the dozen, those pictures lay strewn upon the carpet, unspeakable and at the same time compelling. Could I have fought against that rising tide? From the first I had sensed that inward upheaval, involuntary and burning, which had made me despair when my half-naked mother had flung herself into my arms. I looked at those pictures and trembled but I made the trembling last. I lost control and helplessly sent the remaining piles flying. But I had to pick them up . . . my father, my mother and this swamp of obscenity . . . out of despair I decided to follow this horror through.[355]

This scene is the result of his mother's plot, who had 'planted' the photographs there, knowing that he would inevitably take hold of them. Her motive and purpose for doing

[354] *Ibid.*, p. 41
[355] *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 41

so is for her son to *see* her as she really is. She had in many occasions *told* him that she was worse than his father, that she was repulsive, and that it was that same filth that she loved, that was her truth. However, words are powerless, Pierre is not persuaded, and even if he is, he recognises this as a fact that he can contest, and not as *truth.* It is only through the photographic image that a fundamental change occurs inside him. With the power of photography, he has an experience similar to Roland Barthes' in *Camera Lucida,* with which I will proceed to engage at this point. Barthes' experience occurs when he encounters the picture of his mother at a young age, the Winter Garden Photograph, 'in which I do much more than recognize her (clumsy word): in which I discover her'.[356] It is a discovery of truth, 'a sudden awakening, outside "likeness", a *satori* in which words fail, the rare, perhaps unique evidence of the "So, yes, so much and no more"'.[357]

Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* offers a remarkable account of what is personal in photography, and of what the objective account of science cannot reach. In this respect it is in accordance with Bataille's project (of non-project) in general, and in this instance, in the experience of coming face to face with the reality of a photograph in particular. Discussing *Camera Lucida* in relation to *My Mother* can offer valuable insight not only to this specific scene where photography is explicitly discussed, but also to the broader notion of inner experience and its relationship towards language and rationality.

It is clear that Barthes' *Reflections on Photography* are faithful to this subtitle, as they are precisely that: reflections, from his personal point of view, inextricably bound to his very own experience, namely his dealing with the loss of his mother. His account remains at this subjective level but it is justified from the very beginning by a simple

[356] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography,* Hill and Wang, New York, 1982, p. 109
[357] *Ibid.*

observation: it is undeniable that certain photographs contain in their theme, person or thing (the Spectrum), the quality of a shock, something that is not dependent on the photographer (the Operator), but on the one who directs one's gaze upon it (the Spectator). This detail that is so striking and immediately differentiates a specific photograph from the endless stream of images each of us encounters every day, Barthes calls the *punctum,* which he contrasts to the *studium*, a culturally determined appreciation of the image that can interest, delight, even shock, but without special acuity. On the contrary, the *punctum*

> will break (or punctuate) the *studium* […] it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument. […] A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).[358]

The *punctum* is profoundly personal in its nature, and its contradiction to the *studium* which is determined by known parameters that are derived from culturally defined conditions, for example news photographs that are politically or socially invested, reveals its position in a place beyond the intellect. It is not the rational that responds to the *punctum* but something that remains undefinable and for this reason forces the one seeking for an explanation to resort to means other than the scientific. The *punctum* breaks, pricks, wounds, marks and bruises. The violence of this vocabulary itself is in accordance with its nature. It can only be violent for anything that breaks with a world seen through the eyes of culture, leaves balance and calmness aside.

[358] *Ibid*., pp. 26, 27

Any photographic image has the power to show the world as it is, as photography's *noeme* is '*That-has-been'* and the reality of its theme's existence (in the past) is an undeniable fact. However, our perceivable reality is always determined by the (only) way we can engage with the world. In the Bataillean sense, the human animal, that has denied the natural world and its continuity through work, can engage with the universe only through the eyes of utility. This means that human beings make sense of the world in so far as they have reduced it to their intellect, based on the principle of usefulness, according to which everything is seen filtered through concern for the future, accumulation and utility. Reality for the human being then, is always mediated, and even the shock of the real is based on predetermined circumstances. The *studium* is able to penetrate the mind but not *prick, pierce, wound* it. For that, reality must be perceived in a completely different way, which is closer to what Bataille calls *experience,* unmediated and direct. A lack of meaning is required for a perception that is violent, that is, one that breaks with the calmness of the known, comfortable world; in Barthes' words: 'I am a primitive, a child – or a maniac. I dismiss all knowledge, all culture, I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own'.[359]

Refusal of knowledge, childishness, 'primitiveness', or mania, is the closest to the Bataillean experience, which is found in the essence of photography, in the sense that it can reveal what is hidden behind that which in *Inner Experience* Bataille calls 'the light which comes from babbling'.[360] It is interesting that Barthes mentions the eye here, as the organ that can only see, like a 'primitive', a child, or a maniac. This organ has been associated with knowledge and rationality, and it is also the central theme of *Story of the Eye,* on which Barthes has written his influential essay titled 'The Metaphor

[359] *Ibid*., p. 51
[360] Bataille, *Inner Experience,* p. xxxii

of the Eye'.[361] The eye is never just an eye, it does not merely record images like the camera's mechanical eye; it filters images, it sees them as representations; vision is always mediated. However, in *Story of the Eye,* Bataille manages to do away with this intellectual notion of the eye, and brings to the fore an eye that is displaced, that bleeds into other objects in endless chains of signification that finally signify nothing (or everything): 'the world becomes *blurred'* Barthes argues, '[a]nd the thing that the play of metaphor and metonymy in *Story of the Eye* makes it possible to transgress is sex – which is not, of course, the same as sublimating it, rather the contrary'.[362] There is a paradox evident here: the world becomes blurred, objects and their properties bleed into one another dismantling all authority and hierarchy, resulting in a state where there is no beginning and end (Barthes calls *Story of the Eye* a 'perfectly spherical metaphor').[363] However, it is in this confusion that *lucidity* is manifested. Sex is de-sublimated, as if released by the ties of culture, of the *studium.* Barthes' reading focuses on Bataille's linguistic power of manipulation and he attempts a purely textual reading, in which, Michael Halley argues, the language of the erotic is neglected, precisely because it is read only through the linguistic scope, rendering it 'an exclusively rhetorical phenomenon occasioned by odd metonymical convergences of two distinct and autonomous, in fact parallel, metaphorical chains'.[364] In his view, Barthes denies Bataille's violence, as he dismisses the passages of the book where eroticism functions not merely through metaphor and metonymy, thus denying inner experience as the means with which Bataille communicates what is incommunicable. In *Story of the Eye* it is vision that is manipulated, through the text; it reaches the point where it sees nothing, not because there is nothing to see but rather because what it sees is not the

[361] This essay is incorporated in the Penguin Modern Classics edition of *Story of the Eye* along with Susan Sontag's *The Pornographic Imagination*.
[362] Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye*',* in *Story of the Eye,* pp. 125, 126
[363] Ibid., p. 122
[364] Michael Halley, '...And a Truth For a Truth: Barthes on Bataille'*,* in *On Bataille, Critical Essays,* ed. Leslie Anne Bolt-Irons, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 285

product of perceivable reality but vision turned inwards, into itself, seeing nothing and everything.

Barthes reads *Story of the Eye* with the eye of the *studium,* formalising the text, creating chains and categories that reduce the tale and its eroticism to a linguistically based construction, on the surface, however powerful it may be. Barthes' reading eye of *Story of the Eye* is not the same as the seeing eye of the Winter Garden Photograph. It is this second vision that the first one neglects, the one that seeks to see beyond language and discourse, and which as an effect can only be violent, for it sees truth unmediated and direct. As he himself says, 'the photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed'.[365] In the *Critical Dictionary* edited by Georges Bataille, the entry on the eye focuses on the various linguistic usages and transformations that this organ has undergone, as well as its nature as an object of horror. Interestingly, it is paired with the horror of incest as the two most persistent fears that civilised humanity faces, noting that 'it seems impossible, in fact, to describe the eye without employing the word seductive, nothing it seems, being more attractive in the bodies of animals and men. But this extreme seductiveness is probably at the very edge of horror'.[366] It is seductiveness that links the eye to the horror of incest, but this quality requires that it is perceived not according to its strictly functional usage, as the eye of vision, but as the organ that can also be completely detached from its function: 'in this respect one might relate the eye to the edge of a blade whose appearance provokes both intense and contradictory reactions'.[367] Reading the eye in this way is in accordance with another entry from the *Critical Dictionary,* 'Formless', which offers another way of reading words, no longer according to their meanings, but to their tasks: 'in this way *formless* is

[365] Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye' *Bataille, Story of the Eye,* p. 91
[366] *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, comprising the *Critical Dictionary & Related Texts,* ed. Georges Bataille, and the *Encyclopedia Da Costa,* ed. Robert Lebel & Isabelle Waldberg, Atlas Press, 1995 p. 45
[367] *Ibid.*

not only an adjective having such and such a meaning, but a term serving to declassify, requiring in general that everything should have a form'.[368] The eye, therefore, does not only see but is also seen, it can cut and be cut, rendering vision a wound that is inflicted on the recipient of the gaze as well as on the one who gazes. The eye that reads *My Mother* is one wounded by the words, for these words are not there to be merely read in a superficial manner, but they are, like the photograph (both in Pierre and Barthes' case), a break in the traditional concept of vision. This is arguably the case with all of Bataille's fictional works, but *My Mother* specifically, in its incestuous theme, offers a straightforward way of what it means to read, and to write, beyond language, inside transgression.

Julia Kristeva discussing Bataille's fictional themes argues that 'these are states passing by way of the mother and the desire for her but, far from becoming fixated upon her and, even less, from sublimating her, they pass through her and dirty her'.[369] This is the sort of manipulation that takes place under Bataille's pen: the Oedipal myth, the very foundation of the discourse of rationality and civilisation is being discredited by means of its own structural power. It is from inside the myth that its power to structure the Oedipal subject is diminished, in other words, the operation is disrupted by its own means. It is through discourse that discourse is tested with heterogeneity passing through homogeneity. As Kristeva notes, 'the operations of heterogeneity are not discursive operations even if they pass through language; it is a matter of a "non-discursive" experience, but one that assumes discourse and makes use of it'.[370]

On the theme of incest specifically, the fact that this operation passes through language is especially important, as it highlights the self-abolishing power that lies in this argument. If Bataille uses language in order to express something that is ultimately

[368] *Ibid.,* p. 51
[369] Julia Kristeva, 'Bataille, Experience and Practice'*,* in *On Bataille, Critical Essays,* ed. Leslie Anne Bolt-Irons, SUNY, 1995, p. 250
[370] *Ibid.*, p. 241

beyond language, he focuses on the very foundation of discourse, on the theme that is regarded to be the mother of all discourse: the incestuous theme and the myth of Oedipus. It is Oedipus that imposes the fundamental law and subsequently paves the way for discourse. Bataille tells the story of the narrator and his mother, and in doing so he enforces a double operation: in the first stage, he subordinates himself to the power of Oedipus, accepting his law-making power, the very minute he sets to narrate a story. In the second stage, through the narration enforced by the fundamental law, he denies it, by means of its theme, and through the language that is there to support it.

If every tale of incest is a tale of Oedipus, then every tale is necessarily subjected to the filter of culture, making it possible for civilised human beings - who have necessarily and irrevocably imposed this taboo upon themselves - to make sense of the taboo and what it means for their being. Every Oedipal story is a story of what it means to be human and this implies that it can only be read and understood via the eye of humanity. It takes an Oedipus to understand Oedipus, that is, only the man who has committed the crime, suffered the punishment, and has accepted the fate of a blinded but liberated existence can learn how to read. Every reading is a reading performed by the blinded Oedipus, as if this blinding inflicted upon his eyes has changed them forever, forcing him to see hereafter in a completely different way; the vision that he has been deprived of has now been transformed to a vision that is, on the one hand, concealing (of the original crime that led to the deprivation in the first place) and, on the other, revealing, to the extent that it is only after and because of this that he can make sense of his existence and of the tales that narrate it. It conceals the very fact that there is something that needs to be concealed and in this way it opens up the way for an understanding that is liberated from the weight of his crime.

When Pierre is faced with his mother's violent truth it is this eye which sees beyond language that is wounded, pricked. The photograph is still a medium but one

that leads to a lack of medium, to immediacy. Barthes' *Camera Lucida* opens up the way for a knowledge that is internal, that does not depend on the premises of science or even rationality. In a photograph it is not the quality of the image, the composition, the tones or balance that matter but the personal, subjective gaze of the spectator. It is an internal process, an experience that takes place, but one that is able to touch one to the core.

Barthes, as well as Pierre, share the same experience, one that is, I argue, shared also by the reader of *My Mother.* While Barthes claims that there is no need or purpose to reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph in his book as it is to him alone that it has the effect of the *punctum*, Bataille's book is written as an open wound, and its purpose is precisely to prick. What happens to Pierre when he is faced at once with the image of horror and pleasure, is the same experience that intrudes the reader. Ultimately, what Pierre 'learns' is not that his mother is filthy, but that he himself loves her because of her filth. It is an inner experience in every sense; the truth about her is the truth about himself. Similarly, we could say that Barthes discovers his mother and through that discovery he finds himself, in that via the image, he is open to a different kind of perception, one that is not dependent on 'anything other than his own eye'. An eye like that could only be internal, freed from the culturally determined parameters that define our 'regular vision'.

To return to the narrative, I will consider at this point the significance of the protagonist's own interpretation of his situation, which, moreover, he views as a spectator, or as a reader, to maintain the parallel that emerges between seeing and reading. The *récit* is the illustration of the protagonist's account of the events that lead up to his mother's suicide, as the result of their incestuous relationship which reaches its culminating point towards the end of the book. However, there are instances that interrupt this narration, where Pierre reflects on these events from the position of an

outsider, after the fact as it were. He says: 'Am I then to say of this love that it was incestuous? The insane sensuality we hovered in, was it not impersonal and similar to that so very violent sensuality which my mother had experienced when she wandered naked in the forest, where my father had raped her?' and further down: 'Had we translated our trembling madness into the barren acts of copulation, the cruel game we played with our eyes would have ceased […]. We'd have exchanged the purity of the unattainable for a mess of pottage, to satisfy our immediate greed'.[371] In these reflections, Pierre assumes clearly the role of a narrator which finds himself in the position of recollecting past events in order to frame them in his present context. He even places himself unequivocally in this position, when he writes: 'The place my book allots her, that is the place she still has in my mind'.[372] With this statement he immediately divides the *récit* into two distinct spheres, which are differentiated in their content as well as their temporality: when Pierre narrates the events as they happen, his narration is itself immersed into the present moment while he is describing the context and the surroundings of his experience. On the other hand, with the establishment of himself as the author of the book on his mother, he breaks this timeframe and adds a dimension that removes himself from that present, and places him at the position of the spectator. From this perspective, he is presented as the recipient of a narrative which he is now reflecting upon, and this allows for a comparison with the reader of *My Mother* to which I would like to move at this point.

What Pierre is reflecting on at the moments when he assumes the role of the author of his life events, is the specific Oedipal narrative which has, for him, unfolded in the most concrete way. He assumes at this point a role that is similar to that of the reader in that he 'reads' these events as a tale that was, in a past tense, unfolded in front

[371] Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man,* pp. 87-8
[372] *Ibid.,* p. 89

of him and which now, at a different timeframe, he goes on to appropriate. His writing of this book is the product of this appropriation, in the sense that it is a reading of the Oedipal narrative, on which he is now reflecting. What is important at this instance is the nature of this reflection, and it is from this that a comparison to the reader is possible. What Pierre does is to refuse his experience to be included, or rather, restricted into the world of discourse, that is, the world founded upon the Oedipal narrative. He writes: 'Undeniably, my ideas are of another world (or of the end of the world: sometimes I think that death is the only possible outcome of the filthy debouch, especially of the filthiest, that the aggregate of human lives adds up to […])'.[373] His experience fails to be normalised within the discourse of this world. It is left outside and as such it escapes rationalisation. This, however, is accomplished at the expense of life as it is understood and rendered bearable in this world, and this is why death is for him the only possible outcome. This is also in accordance with his mother's words, which he receives in one of her letters: 'I belong body and soul to that other world and so do you. I have absolutely no interest in this world where they scratch about, patiently waiting for death to enlighten them. As for me, it is the wind of death that sustains the life in me […]'.[374] This couple can only exists in another world, for if it was to exist in this one, it would have to be conformed to a limited definition of the kind that 'incest' consists of. It would be, in other words, forced into discourse, losing therein its very existence which is that of excess.

In the above quotation it is useful at this point to take into account the significance of death which is revealed as having a dual character: 'the death that enlightens' is contrasted to 'the death that sustains life'. The former is the death of the beings who live their lives with the sole concern of avoiding it. Bataille has described

[373] *Ibid.*
[374] *Ibid.,* p. 93

this in his essay 'Hegel, Death and Sacrifice', first published in 1955, which is useful for the clarification of the duality of death presented in this instance. He writes:

> it [the human animal] finds precisely human death, the only one which frightens, which freezes - but which only frightens and transfixes the man who is absorbed in his future disappearance, to the extent that he is a separated and irreplaceable being. The only true death supposes separation and, through the discourse which separates, the consciousness of being separated.[375]

This is a description of the 'first kind' of death, the one that belongs to a world where Pierre's mother has absolutely no interest in. In this world of separated beings, death is something that human beings await in the future, constantly informing their actions which also necessarily conform to this separateness. On the opposite side, the death that sustains the life in her, is one that is experienced in life itself. In the same essay, Bataille writes: 'Thus, at all costs, man must live at the moment that he really dies, or he must live with the impression of really dying'.[376] She lives while facing death, bringing death to life and life to death. Instead of being conscious of her separation, she is conscious of her death, not in a future time but at the moment she is alive, while dying. The impossibility of this state in a rational context is the reason why it is found in a different world, and this is a world that both Pierre and his mother share. In this sense, this couple cannot be named as 'incestuous', for a definition like this presupposes their existence in the world which they have denied. A more fitting definition would be that of the 'transgressive couple', which implies a violation of the rules of the world immersed in discourse and the appearance of a space where discourse is annihilated.

When Pierre reads, therefore, the events of his life, his reading is one that remains faithful to his initial experience. The temporality from which he writes the book

[375] Georges Bataille, 'Hegel, Death and Sacrifice', in *Yale French Studies,* No. 78, *On Bataille,* pp. 15-16
[376] *Ibid.,* p. 20

on his mother is one that belongs to a future tense, in relation to the events that he narrates. However, he retains their transgressive nature and refuses to force them into the discourse of this world. He is in this sense the Oedipus that refuses to blind himself, and what he sees is in accordance with the vision of his experience, which has from the very beginning initiated him into the world that he shares with his mother. The eye that sees the photographs at the beginning of this initiation is the same that operates throughout the tale, and even beyond it, on the level of the narration of an experience already passed. When Pierre is in the course of the *récit* once again drawn to the same 'filthy' photographs, he says: 'The ignominious scenes shown in the photographs in my eyes acquired that brilliance and that grandeur but for which life would be without rapture and its eye never turned upon the sun or upon death'.[377] Pierre here is commenting upon La Rochefoucauld's line 'the eye can outstare neither the sun nor death', while realising that his mother is for him divine, that she is 'that God of blinding sunlight', 'that God of death'.[378] This Oedipus then, is still blind; but blind by sunlight. The phrase 'blinding sunlight' alludes to the paradox that is expressed by the striking contradiction between blindness and light. While blindness alludes to darkness, sunlight brings to mind brightness, and therefore, in their combination, 'blinding sunlight' indicates the paradoxical position of seeing while being blind. We can call this an 'active blindness', where the eye is able to turn towards the sun and towards death, in a vision that is equal to a cut, a slit, or a wound.

I would like at this point to consider an account of blindness that in its concreteness can offer an insight into the specific kind of vision that we are concerned with here. In a lecture that Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges gave in 1977 titled 'Blindness', he states:

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[377] Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man,* p. 51
[378] *Ibid.*

> People generally imagine the blind as enclosed in a black world. […] One of the colors that the blind - or at least this blind man - do not see is black; another is red. […] The blind live in a world that is inconvenient, an undefined world from which certain colors emerge: for me, yellow, blue (except that the blue may be green), and green (except that the green may be blue).[379]

The account of a blind man on his own blindness, because of this 'insider', personal perspective, manifests this condition as a vision of a different kind. As opposed to a definition of blindness that is negative - the blind do not see - he speaks of a blindness that is positive: the blind see, and furthermore, they see constantly; it is the blackness of darkness that is denied to them. Bringing blindness back to its concrete state, it emerges as active, filled with colours that are presented to the one who sees them in a confused state: 'except that blue may be green', 'except that green may be blue'.[380] However, it is the definition of 'blue' and 'green' that is different in this account, when compared to an unimpaired vision. This implies that the same colours are manifested in both states, and it is their interpretation that differs, allowing even for a complete reversal of the two.

Borges' account removes from blindness the character of negativity by bringing to the fore his own direct experience of blinded vision. His account has the merit of being uncontested, in the sense that his position is one that is in the most direct contact with the theme he engages with, therefore it is freed from perspectives that rely on commonly defined parameters. While Borges' blindness is, in a sense, as real as it can be, Pierre's blindness is at the other extreme, as detached from reality as it can be. The latter is occupying a space that resists reality, and his vision is one that sees while not

[379] Jorge Luis Borges, 'Blindness', in *The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise*, Penguin Books, Great Ideas, 2010, pp. 111, 112
[380] *Ibid.*

seeing, or rather, what he sees is in accordance with his experience of excess; he sees excess, or 'that God of blinding sunlight'.[381] What connects these extreme cases, therefore, is their detachment from a perspective that brings to the fore an interpretation that is mediated by a discourse based on common understanding: it does not matter if blue is green and green is blue, for it is only through Borges' eyes that these colours emerge, and what they signify is that they do exist in the negative state of blindness, thus reversing it to a positive state. Similarly, Pierre's eyes blinded by sunlight, also reverse his blindness to a positive state where vision acquires the most personal characteristics guided not by extreme tangible reality, but by his extreme, excessive inner experience. This positive, active vision is informed by an absolute detachment from discursive reality, from the world that his mother and himself have no interest in, and it is for this reason that they can both look straight at the sun as well as death.

This vision employed by Pierre, thus, is one that denies the Oedipal narrative and as such it denies a reading that has a clear progression from beginning, to middle, to end. Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, published in 1973, writes about the theme that consists of the title of his book: '[the pleasure of the text] is an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end), if it is true that every narrative (every unveiling of the truth) is a staging of the (absent, hidden, or hypostasised) father […]'.[382] To deny this narrative is to deny knowledge in every sense, along with the comfort of a definitive ending to every tale. This is what Pierre does when he reads the narrative of his own life, and this is what, I argue, the reader of *My Mother* does in a similar operation. When the reader engages with the text, she is faced with a tale of incest. However, she is also faced with the narrator's own reading, which is, as I have argued, one that refuses a definition that conforms to any such formalising discourse.

[381] Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man* p. 51
[382] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* Hill and Wang, 1975, p. 10

When the reader follows the narrator's own 'interpretation', she also enters a space where definitions are null and where conclusion is lacking. The text then, instead of a platform where meaning is generated, becomes one where meaning is lost. This, however, does not imply that nothing remains of the tale, but that, similarly to Pierre's 'blinded vision', what remains, what is seen, belongs to the domain of excess, where traditional discursive ways of understanding are powerless.

In order to pursue this argument further, I would like to look at another text by Barthes, where his discussion of 'the obtuse' can illuminate the loss of meaning generated by this specific reading of *My Mother.* In his essay 'The Third Meaning', he gives an account of what he calls 'the obtuse meaning', which he observes in the stills of Eisenstein's films, mainly in *Ivan the Terrible.* The obtuse is one of the three levels of meaning, the first one being the *informational*, corresponding to communication, and the second the *symbolic* or obvious, corresponding to signification. The *obtuse*, being the third meaning, corresponds to *signifiance,* which, contrary to the other two, is not situated inside the language system, and cannot be structurally identified. It is a signifier without a signified: 'If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything […]. [T]he obtuse meaning is outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocution'.[383] As a result, it creates a space where communication occurs outside the field of language, incapacitating the critic's meta-language: 'we do without language yet never cease to understand one another'.[384]

Understanding one another without the aid of language is the essence of Bataille's project of communication. However, while Barthes focuses on the visual power of non-discursive communication via Eisenstein's stills, Bataille aims to bring it

[383] Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning*',* in *Image Music Text,* Fontana Press, 1977, p. 61
[384] *Ibid.*

out through writing itself. Barthes identifies the obtuse in 'the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure',[385] and he mentions Bataille as having expressed one of the regions of the obtuse in the latter's essay 'The Big Toe'.[386] He finds in Bataille's essay the essence of the erotic which is picked up by the obtuse, and which is not linked to beauty but to its opposite. For Bataille, it is baseness that is seductive, and in this essay, more specifically, it is the baseness and ugliness of the big toe, 'the most *human* part of the human body'.[387] The big toe is the most human part of the body because it has become the foundation on which we stand, erect, with our head to the heavens, as opposed to the ape's toe, used for tree dwelling, indifferent to the world that humans regard as elevated. However, despite its significance for humanity's erection, it is condemned to being the most base, grotesque part of the human body due to its proximity to mud and to base seduction, that is, seduction emanating from its baseness, directly opposed to elevated, ideal beauty. Bataille in this essay brings the erotic back, or rather, drags it down, from elevated beauty to base, 'muddy' seduction, and in this process, he illustrates the erotic that Barthes finds in the obtuse; the erotic thus, is ungraspable as it is excessive, and it escapes a discourse that separates the low from the high, signified in the human body by the toe and the head accordingly: 'within the body blood flows in equal quantities from high to low and from low to high',[388] and therefore, for Bataille, the two axes are brought to one and the same level. The head loses its authority as the elevated part of the body from which intellectual superiority emanates, and its debasement to the same level as that of the foot brings about the annihilation of authority and subsequently the loss of its power to produce meaning.

[385] *Ibid.*, p. 55
[386] *Ibid.*, p. 60
[387] Bataille, 'The Big Toe', in *Visions of Excess*, p. 20. Italics in original
[388] *Ibid.*

It is useful at this point to quote Barthes' account of the obtuse more fully, in order to identify the effect it can have on a reading of *My Mother* that moves away from meaning. He writes:

> As for the other meaning, the third, the one 'too many', the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive […]. [T]he third meaning also seems to me greater than the pure, upright, secant, legal perpendicular of the narrative, it seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely. […] [T]he obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the false, the pastiche), it is on the side of the carnival.[389]

The obtuse belongs to the domain of excess. As such it cannot be contained inside the text, it opens the field of meaning infinitely, and therefore, it can never reach an end. Furthermore, it exists beyond culture, knowledge and information, in the field of useless expenditure. The third meaning, thus, escapes meaning itself. It is in this sense similar to the *punctum* that Barthes identifies in photography, where a different kind of vision is manifested, one that instead of interpreting meaning wounds and pricks. This is the only vision appropriate for seeing excess, one that retains the nature of this notion as undefinable. In the course of *My Mother'*s narrative, in a scene where Pierre's mother tells him the truth about his father and about her own ecstatic experience in the woods where he was conceived, Pierre weeps: 'those tears, springing from the furthermost extremity of things, carried me to the extremity of the whole of life'.[390] The

[389] Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', pp. 54, 55
[390] Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man* p. 73

conversation that takes place in this scene is indicative of the impossibility of attaching meaning to something that is by definition excessive: '"You are crying", my mother said, "you don't know why, but cry, cry some more". "Mother", I said to her, "they are glad tears, I think … I don't know any more —" "You don't know, there's no knowing[…]"'.[391] This conversation also comes as an answer to two previous instances where Pierre is asking to 'know'.[392] His mother's reply is that 'there is no knowing', and also, in an indirect manner, that tears in their inability to be comprehended, consist of the most appropriate reaction to his state. His tears are nonsensical and excessive and as such they are in accordance with the domain that she occupies and that he is about to enter. If there is no knowing, then the necessity for a different kind of communication appears, one that, as is the case with tears, lies beyond the limits of discourse.

The obtuse opens up such a communication, being the 'third meaning'. I argue that a similar 'third reading' is possible and even necessary in the case of Bataille's fiction and in *My Mother* specifically, where the reader is guided by an eye that is equivalent to that of the protagonist's. In a reading that extends outside culture, knowledge and information, the narrative is left infinitely open, for it refuses to be confined within the limits of meaning. As such, its incestuous theme loses its formalising discursive power and its nature as transgressive acquires a general, fundamental force that transgresses the limits of discourse itself. The narrative is no doubt one of incest. But it is from this limited, confined perspective that its limits are able to be overcome, in a movement that annihilates as well as highlights them. From this follows that the reader is the one who ultimately allows the narrative to remain infinitely open. It is her eye whose vision can take two distinct directions: it can either be enclosed in a blindness that conceals Oedipus' crime but reveals the world narrated

[391] *Ibid.*

[392] *Ibid.*, in p. 45: 'I would like to know what you know', and in p. 62: 'I want to know what you want. I want to know and I want to love what you want'.

through the discourse of rationality, or it can be guided by the blindness that can only see what Oedipus sees, with an excessive vision that cannot rationalise the narrative, and consequently, cannot bring it to any sort of conclusion.

This reading allows for a non-discursive communication, beyond meaning and beyond the text. It is performed by Barthes' eye when he sees the Winter Garden Photograph, or a woman's 'single bun of hair' in Eisenstein's stills ,[393] as well as by Pierre when he encounters his mother's obscene photographs. It is even the same eye that Bataille mentions at the end of 'The Big Toe': 'A return to reality does not imply any new acceptances, but means that one is seduced in a base manner, without transpositions and to the point of screaming, opening his eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe'.[394] The reader of *My Mother*, opening her eyes wide before the text, allows the narrative to be manifested in its excess, refusing to close it off in a formalizing, restrictive reading.

[393] Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', p. 58
[394] Bataille, 'The Big Toe', in *Visions of Excess,* p. 23

Conclusion

As the title of this thesis suggests, my aim has been first and foremost to address the problem of reading Georges Bataille as a problem of reading excess. This presupposes that Bataille's work is viewed in a manner that takes into account its 'peculiarities'; in other words, the various themes with which he engages, the different writing styles which he employs, although giving the impression that he is an author that can be evaluated each time according to the 'genre' he is concerned with, they reveal something else: that this apparent disconnection in Bataille's writings instead of being seen as a means for confusion or an opportunity for debate over the label under which he is to be placed, makes manifest, if it is recognised as having a value of its own, the elusive Bataillean system that is founded on this confusion and disparity. What this suggests is that his work forms not exactly a system but a non-system, where the apparent disconnections between his writings are not to be forced into a specific form (to a system of confusion but a formalised system nonetheless) but rather employed for the appearance of something that precisely resists a specific form. What reading Bataille as reading excess exposes, is that a notion that resists normalisation can nevertheless be manifested inside the normalising system par excellence, that is, language. Excess, therefore, is exposed as it were 'between the lines', in the void that is opened up within discourse, or even beyond discourse.

The obvious problem that needs to be overcome in reading Bataille is the danger of forcing notions that are by definition unassimilable into a homogenising system. This is the same problem that Bataille faces himself and that is passed on to the reader as the final recipient of his work. Thus, an intimate relationship is formed between the reader and the writer, based on this mutual challenge of maintaining from within language that

which is an overcoming of language. By focusing on this relationship, the reader is perceived as having an active part in Bataille's project, that is, the exposure of excess within the confining limits of linguistic expression. In order for there to be a non-system therefore, excess needs to retain its character as unassimilable, and that is an operation that is taken up by the reader, with the appropriation of theory in the very act of reading itself. In other words, theory is put to the test by its recipient: reading about inner experience for example, takes on a different meaning when this reading is itself open to what this notion signifies; it becomes the embodiment of inner experience, in the sense that what Bataille illustrates in the pages of the book with the same title, *Inner Experience*, is perceived in a direct manner in the fictional world of *Madame Edwarda*, to give an example. There, inner experience is felt directly by the protagonist as well as the reader without the aid of a theoretical discourse. This manifests the power of Bataille's fiction which opens up a space that runs parallel to his theoretical ideas, functioning as a language that is alternative to that of theory, and that presents the reader with the option of preserving the excessive nature of the text, by denying it a formalising conclusion.

In reading excess, the basic differentiation of theory and fiction is brought to the fore as an issue which is central to this thesis. Reading Bataille's work unavoidably takes into account the tension that exists between these two domains, a tension that is resolved with the consideration of their intrinsic connection. Fiction is read as an alternative to the language of theory, but not to theory itself. This means that fiction and theory are both employed to express the same notion, that is, excess, which is by definition unsayable. Therefore, while Bataille's theoretical works constitute the means for expressing the issues he engages with in a specific way, via the language of theory, his fictional texts are a means for depicting them in a different way, one that is in a sense more direct. To clarify, Bataille in his fiction does not explain what transgression

is, but this notion emerges, nevertheless, in the act of reading, seen as an experience that is transferred to the reader as it happens. The immediacy of fiction is found in this: in that the nature of transgression as a flash, or a shock, is able to be transferred onto the reader intact. The language that Bataille employs in his fictional writings is one that has the character of a shock, that wounds or pricks, and that creates a corresponding temporality that is momentary, disconnected from a concern for the future that is linked to the everyday reality of utility. However, it is not the case that a different 'kind' of transgression occurs in the fictional world of Georges Bataille. It is transgression as experience, that is, untheorised and in this sense unmediated, manifested via the act of reading.

In considering the interdependence of Bataille's theory and fiction and the effect that a combined reading of the two has on the understanding of the notion of transgression, the latter has emerged as a central notion in his thought; both in bringing to the fore a general argument that allows for his work to be seen in its wholeness, as well as in its connection to the notion of communication which manifests its paradoxical nature of appearing at the limit of rationality itself, transgression emerges in this thesis as a guideline that unifies the apparently disconnected themes in Bataille's thought.

Transgression has a central role in Bataille's theory, first of all because it is presented as a notion that lies at the center of humanity itself. In this sense it is linked with what is read in this thesis as Bataille's anthropological endeavour to explain what is fundamental in the human condition, and that forms the general argument that underlines every aspect of his thought. On the theme of expenditure and the sacred, the generality of transgression emerges through Bataille's theory of general economy which brings human beings in sync with the current of the natural world of which they are part of, that is, with the violent expenditures that govern the universe and which humanity

has stubbornly denied. Accumulation and utility, the principle opposite to that of expenditure to which humanity has conformed in order to be able to be survive in the human society, is what needs to be transgressed in the very first instance: it is at the most fundamental level that transgression is considered first and foremost, when, human beings in lucid consciousness, deliberately break the rules that they have set upon themselves.

Transgression, therefore, emerges as a problem of consciousness in Bataille's endeavour to sketch out a general theory of what it is to be human. As such, the breaking of the rules that this notion implies has an effect on the very notion of humanity, and specifically on the way in which humanity is perceived. To the extent that Bataille's view is one that favours the superiority of experience over knowledge, transgression is seen as the experience that allows man to understand his nature, to reach his truth, from the inside, as an experience. Therefore, Bataille's views on the human condition emerge as hermeneutic rather than epistemological, offering an existential presentation of 'what it is to be human', with experience highlighted as an inner 'operation' that reveals man's nature in its wholeness. The latter, in this sense, consists of a view of man that includes the sphere of the sacred, that is, the domain where excess reigns and which is otherwise excluded from his 'normal', non-violent, everyday reality. The result of the moment of transgression, the entering into a state where utility and concern for the future are vanished, is an indication of the fact that this notion consists of a condition that is absolutely central to a perception of humanity that is 'whole', unrestricted by the limits set by a 'fabricated' as it were, view. Therefore, transgression is underlined as the notion that allows for humanity to consciously experience itself at the limit, and this liminal position is crucial not only as a theoretical instance in Bataille's work, but also, and with equal importance, as a precondition for the very creation of his work and its perception by the reader.

This universality of transgression, derived from Bataille's general views on 'what it is to be human', is contrasted to another instance of transgression, one that is evident when considering his claims on specific issues that are restricted by historically defined parameters. A tension thus is created between the ahistorical, universal character of transgression, and its historical, culturally defined instances. This tension leads to the conclusion that in the constant 'back and forth' from universal to specific issues, transgression can be glimpsed as a factor that is stable; in this sense it can be applied as a condition to, for example, the appearance of fascism as a phenomenon that gathers the heterogeneous forces of society in a specific time and place, while at the same time it appears as a basic human condition inherent in the very beginning of humanity. For Bataille, therefore, the general and the specific are inextricably connected, as his thought oscillates between different manifestations of the human condition, while the latter is always taken into account in its generality; in other words, the conditions for the basis of humanity are always considered along with the facts that are manifested in specific timeframes.

Another categorisation of transgression would be that of the 'personal', personified for example by the couple in eroticism as opposed to the 'communal', evident in collective transgressive experiences such as sacrifice. The moment of transgression in both instances, although having the same inherent characteristics, is distinct in each case in so far as the communication that is its result occurs in a different manner. This is linked to the previous issue, namely the tension between a theory that is universal as opposed to one that is applied in specific circumstances. This issue can be solved if we take into account the fact that methodology, the problem of how to write excess, is, together with its natural pair (how to read excess), part of the solution. In this paradoxical statement, we can see how reading creates a community of readers that

forms a bridge between the personal and the communal, as they are both perceived via the medium of writing.

Transgression emerges as the link between fiction and theory for it forces the reader to enter a continuous back and forth between the two; fiction informs theory and vice versa, in the sense that the former consists of a kind of 'practice' of the latter. From this follows that first of all, Bataille's notions of transgression, communication and excess, expressed in his theoretical writings, remain incomplete without a consideration of his fiction for the following reason: what they signify is - in theoretical language - found in a place that lies beyond it. They escape utility, therefore they cannot be confined within the limits of a study, and at the same time they are posited beyond language itself, rendering their very verbalisation problematic. On the other hand, these same notions remain similarly in an incomplete state in the domain of fiction as well. There, the reader is faced with a text that can be approached in different ways: she can engage with a reading that focuses strictly on the characters, scenes and events of the story, or in a completely different take, she can focus on the textual/linguistic manipulation of language that neglects the content. However, when the reading of Bataille's fiction is aligned with his theory, transgression is manifested in a third approach, or a third reading: one where the content and its writing, the scenes along with the words that shape them, reveal transgression as it emerges from the annihilation of meaning. Therefore, its effect, which is the overcoming of the useful world along with the destruction of knowledge, is manifested as precisely that: as an operation beyond language, via the text but while transgressing its limits. In other words, while theory illustrates the nature of transgression as a notion that overcomes the limit while simultaneously exposing it, fiction is the embodiment of this limit itself. The reader, being the recipient in both cases, undergoes as it were, a transfer from sense to non-sense, where sense here corresponds to theory and non-sense to fiction. In this schema,

the reader in the first phase 'learns' via the theory what transgression is, while in the second phase her knowledge is annihilated via the fiction, where transgression can never be learned but only experienced. However, both theory and fiction are informed by one another, in the sense that a complete 'understanding' of a notion that escapes understanding itself can only be achieved via a reading that takes this paradox into account.

In Bataille's fiction, more specifically, transgression is highlighted as a mainly sexual eroticised experience. However, I have argued that this should not lead to a reading that is restricted by this tendency. What Bataille's erotic fiction reveals is eroticism as a fundamental human condition, and therefore, it is as such that it must be read. Between a reading that focuses on the strictly erotic nature of the scenes and one that focuses on the strictly linguistic value of Bataille's manipulation of language, an approach that takes into account the reader's response as she encounters the text, is able to reveal the nature of the limit from which it is written and which she experiences as well. In this sense, Bataille, the author, writes at the limits of his existence, about the limits of existence, and the reader is faced with this liminal state. A reading that remains faithful to the author's appeal for non-knowledge is one that also remains faithful to his theory by retaining, paradoxically, what remains when all theory is annihilated. In other words, the reader 'understands' what transgression is by letting herself experience in the act of reading what the characters experience themselves. It is in this sense that transgression is direct, for the reader experiences it *as it happens,* in the very act of reading itself.

Bataille's erotic fiction also corresponds to the methodological problem he is faced with, which becomes evident for example in *Eroticism.* In this thesis, eroticism emerges as a problem of methodology in so far as it represents an experience rather than a term that can be approached scientifically, creating thus the paradox of writing that

which cannot by definition be written. From this perspective, we can conclude that writing eroticism is an issue that is tackled via fiction, where eroticism is highlighted as an inner experience and is furthermore communicated as such. Therefore, fiction for Bataille is an answer to the theoretical/methodological challenge of writing the erotic, and one that retains the paradoxical nature of the initial problem: erotic fiction is an answer to the problem, but not one that closes off the issue. On the contrary, eroticism is proposed as a riddle in these fictional works, as a notion whose deciphering does not lead to a definitive answer but whose nature is that of riddle itself. In this manner, eroticism is maintained as an inner experience whose verbalisation provides a space for its appearance and not a clear cut solution. The question of how to write eroticism is answered by fiction, while ultimately revealing that it is the *excessive* nature of fiction that renders it an ideal candidate. Therefore, it is the ability of fiction to manifest eroticism despite of itself, that is, via language but beyond it, that is of the greatest importance. Ultimately, Bataille's paradoxical project is not one that is in need of a clarification that would diminish the paradox, but one that would maintain it. To maintain the paradox is to reaffirm the basic argument in Bataille's thought that it is only at the limit that humanity can get a glimpse of itself in its wholeness.

On this issue, the tension between knowledge and non-knowledge also appears as a crucial factor, especially in Bataille's fiction where the annihilation of meaning is presented as a necessary condition for the reader. An affective reading, one that takes into account the direct impact that Bataille's transgressive writing has on the process of reading itself, exposes the written text as a space where knowledge disappears. The reaction to Bataille's fiction is in this sense, the manifestation of a break with reality, that is, reality as the everyday engagement with the world of utility where everything is linked together in an endless chain of meaning. I would like to quote one such reaction that came from a friend upon reading *Story of Eye*: 'It was a daze really. My heart was

knotted in stress and I was breathing heavily… It was a violation of every form of order through which I have sedimented as a legible subject'. Anxiety is precisely the result of the violation of every order, including the order of the text itself. When order is destroyed, knowledge is destroyed and this leads to the appearance of a world devoid of objects, and, unavoidably, empty of meaning. The reader has nothing to hold on to and this is in accordance with a loss of the self in the most fundamental sense: a self-consciousness based on knowledge gives way to one that is empty of knowledge, but which, for this very reason, is sovereign. Sovereignty is attained in nothingness, in the void where meaning disappears, and which the reader finds in the space of the text of non-knowledge. However, it is always from meaning that non-meaning is reached, as, similarly, the rule needs to be in effect in order for it to be violated. The rules of text as the body of knowledge meant to preserve and transfer knowledge, are transgressed in a movement that manifests this violation as an experience founded on the breaking of these rules.

Furthermore, the reader's part is highlighted as a factor that contributes to the appreciation of Bataille's work as a whole, in the sense that the latter's wholeness corresponds to its not being able to be contained within a discourse that is inclusive. To conclude on Bataille is to acknowledge the fact that conclusion is impossible in his work. That is not to say that Bataille's corpus suffers from a systemic incoherence which is the reason for its resistance to a definitive reading. On the contrary, it is to realise that his system is one that resists a definitive conclusion because of its very content, that is, the engagement with what escapes discourse itself. One of Bataille's major contributions is his response to the challenge of writing something that is not meant to be written, in other words, something that is not meant to be theorised. To produce a theory that is not a theory, or a project that is not a project, requires that the product of this endeavour, the written work, will not be confined within the strict limits

of a closed off system of knowledge. For this to be accomplished, the reader has to be perceived as part of Bataille's project; in his several appeals towards the reader, in theoretical as well as fictional works, the author urges her to read in a specific way, providing her with a sort of manual, or instructions on how to approach his work. These 'instructions' should not be taken lightly for they highlight the importance of the relationship that is formed between them. The writer depends on the reader and vice versa, in that it is at their meeting point that the written text is overcome. The reader is entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining Bataille's non-project, and that is accomplished with the specific kind of reading that allows for incompletion. Bataille's readers form a 'community of readers' in the sense that they contribute to a sharing that has a value of its own. It is communication that is shared in this community, an experience beyond discourse that is exposed as such and not as attained knowledge. This is what makes this community an impossible one, in accordance to Bataille's own impossible project. Therefore, the ideal reader is one who participates in the sharing of Bataille's impossibility, by refusing to formalise his thought into a rational system but rather contributes to its exposure to communication. In this way, completion and wholeness attain their importance in their negation; in other words, to follow Bataille's own 'instructions' and therefore to remain faithful to his theoretical views, one must complete his work by leaving it infinitely open, reaffirming the paradox that demands that his thought is complete only in its incompleteness.

This major challenge undertaken by Bataille is one also undertaken by the reader. The latter is illustrated in this thesis as providing a solution to the impasse, for the reader allows for a constant back and forth from theory to fiction that highlights the necessity for continuity in Bataille's thought. This continuity implies that in the apparent disconnection of Bataille's writings there exists a unifying factor that runs throughout his work. However, continuity is maintained by something that emerges

outside of theory, outside of the text, as his work is communicated not in the sharing of its meaning but in its non-knowledge, in the disappearance of meaning. Therefore, transgression emerges as a notion that exists in the paradoxical position of being a major theoretical contribution in Bataille's work while at the same time it consists of the negation of this very theory. In signifying the moment of non-discursive communication it paves the way for a reading that remains faithful to the latter, that favours experience over knowledge, and as such it is in accordance with Bataille's general flow of thought. In this sense, reading excess is reading at the limit, which leads to an opening up of Bataille's ideas in their sharing. Therefore, each reading is also a manifestation of Bataille's argument for a communication that exceeds the limits of discourse, which is, however, accomplished via discourse itself. Transgression is itself manifested each time a reading takes place that resists the closing off of Bataille's thought into a definitive discursive system, and in this sense, reading excess consists of the most striking manifestation of transgression in/between his work.

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